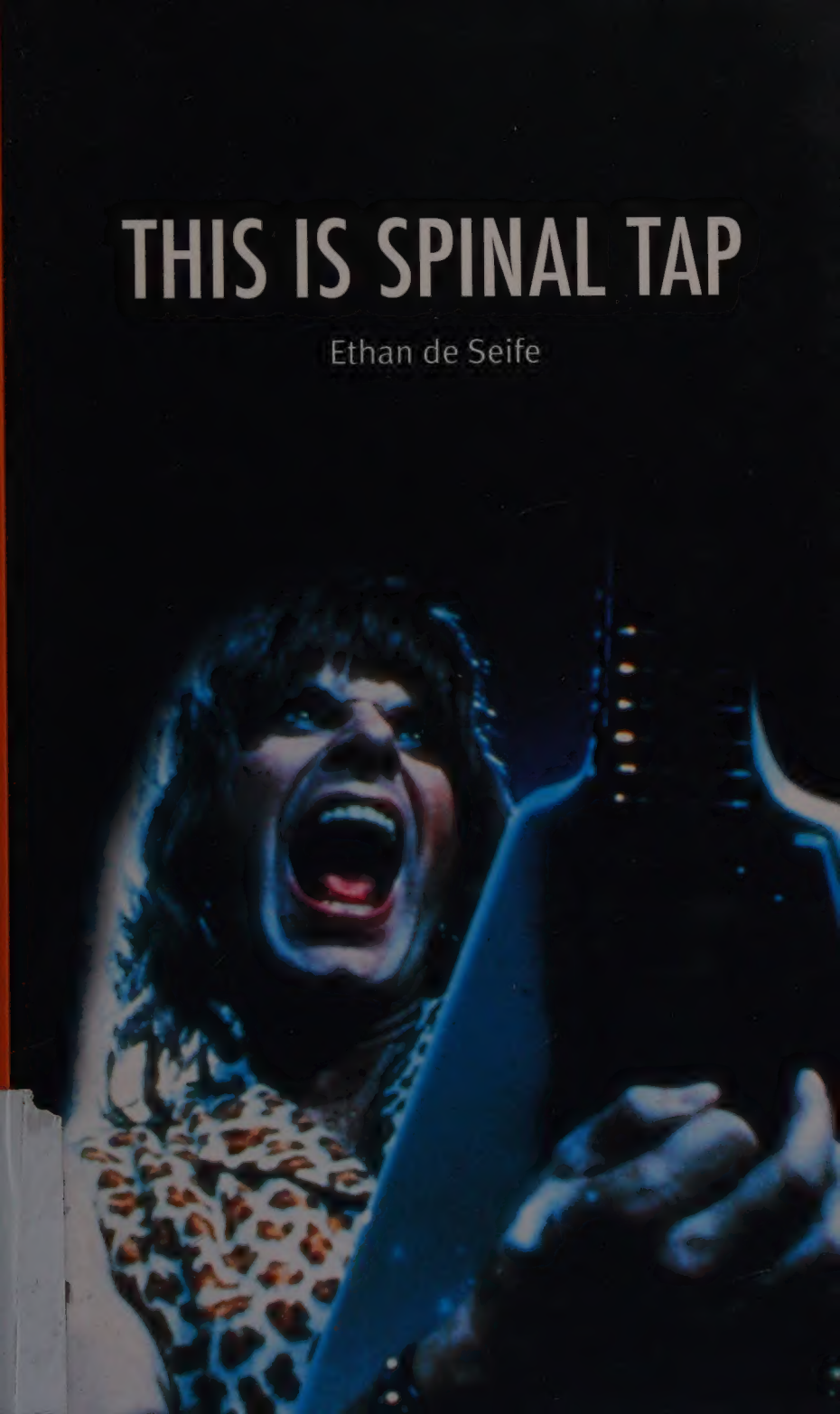
THIS IS SPINAL TAP

Ethan de Seife



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THIS IS SPINAL TAP

Ethan de Seife

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This book is dedicated to Lauren Locascio.
(I *told* you I would dedicate my first book to you.)

1

I LOVE *TAP*

Most of the memories of my eleventh year have dimmed in the ensuing decades, but a few remain vivid. I recall quite clearly that I fleetingly attained semi-legendary status for using my forehead to return a kick-off booted by my school's soccer superstar; that my friends and I recorded a great many 'comedy' routines to cassette tape; that a few clueless attempts at dating failed disastrously.

I also remember going with my mother to see *This Is Spinal Tap* in a large, near-empty theatre in Harrison, New York. This tragic, now-defunct cinema was a massive, one-screen affair with an identity crisis (mainstream? art-house? second-run?), whose forte was surely *not* self-promotion. At this particular showing, in the spring of 1984, there were perhaps only four other people in the theatre, even though *This Is Spinal Tap* had received a good deal of positive press in, among other places, the local newspaper of record, the *New York Times*.[1] I remember the emptiness of the house because a very creepy man decided, in a theatre of five hundred empty chairs, to sit two seats away from us. We moved.

I am quite sure that I didn't 'get' the central joke of *This Is Spinal Tap* – that the film is not a genuine documentary – but I do remember a general sense of confusion when it was over. Though I hadn't heard of Spinal Tap before, I had heard, or heard of, many bands like them: the good stuff like Judas Priest and Iron Maiden, and the pretenders like Ratt and Dokken. I was young enough not to recognise the many well-known actors in the film, though I was pretty sure I'd seen that Marty DiBergi fellow on TV somewhere. The film stuck with me for the unusual confusion it caused.

Within the next few years, I saw *Spinal Tap* – on video, the medium largely responsible for creating the film's cult – a few more times, got the joke and grew to love the film. During this time, when VHS ruled the suburbs, the film became part of 'the rotation': the tapes that my friends and I would rent again and again. Soon, *Spinal Tap* became a key reference point within my group of friends.

My high-school friend Jason was the first *Tap* fanatic I ever knew. Perhaps because he was a guitarist himself, and because he knew as much about rock music as one can know in high school, he was wise to the true genius of *Tap* well before I was. Jason had a Nigel Tufnel quotation for every occasion; he wouldn't allow me to look at his guitar. I may have figured out on my own that *This Is Spinal Tap* was a 'mockumentary', but it was Jason who truly initiated me into the Cult of *Tap*.

My second *Tap* midwife was surely my college friend Jonah, for whom the film is almost literally a religion: it provides a blueprint for living. Two of the most important things in Jonah's life are rock 'n' roll and comedy; *This Is Spinal Tap*, therefore, is more or less his Bible, his Bhagavad-Gita and his Talmud, all rolled up together. So important is *Spinal Tap* to him that, upon learning that a friend's fiancée had not seen the film, he insisted she watch it before the couple married.

Though I am perhaps not as devout as Jason or Jonah, I am a proud member of the cult of *This Is Spinal Tap*. As a music lover from an early age – and as a charter member of the MTV Generation – I have long appreciated the wonderful ridiculousness of rock 'n' roll. I do dearly love it, in nearly all its forms, but I also love to laugh at its glorious excesses. If you take rock 'n' roll too seriously, then, on some level, you don't really get it. Rock music is one of the most important sources of intellectual and emotional pleasure in my life, partly because it treads that fine line between stupid and clever. And I don't think it is much of a stretch to assume that Rob Reiner, Christopher Guest, Michael McKean and Harry Shearer feel similarly. One of the truly great things about *This Is Spinal Tap* is that several of the band's songs are actually quite good – not just as comedy, but as rock songs. The central riff of 'Tonight I'm Gonna Rock You Tonight' compares quite favourably with the best of Judas Priest; the melody and lyrical inventiveness of 'Big Bottom' would please Bon Scott, if not Smokey Robinson; and 'Hell Hole' is simply a pitch-perfect example of early 1980s pop-metal, and is, frankly, better than most other such songs of the time. The musical talent of the members of Spinal Tap is one of the principal reasons that the film is so successful: this *faux* band is better than many 'genuine' pop-metal bands (though, according to any relevant definition of the word, Spinal Tap is as real a band as any other), a fact which very skilfully complicates the separation of documentary and fiction.

I also consider myself a lifelong student of comedy: eventually, I parlayed a love for Looney Tunes, the Three Stooges, Woody Allen, Monty Python and Jerry Lewis into a dissertation on Frank Tashlin, a director who almost never ventured beyond the genre of comedy. I believe that, of all narrative genres and modes, comedy is not only the most difficult to carry out successfully, but the one whose potential rewards

are the richest. Not only is laughter – and the intellectual satisfaction that comes from a joke well told – one of the most uplifting and powerful forces in human experience, but the things we laugh at tell us a great deal about ourselves and our society. It is extremely important to laugh, and it is especially important to laugh at people who tell you how important comedy is.

This Is Spinal Tap engages many different modes of comedy, all with equal skill and intelligence. Its sight gags, for instance, have become legendary: the most famous is probably the model of Stonehenge that is in danger of being crushed by a dwarf, but I am partial to the scene in which David, Nigel and Derek all sport on their lips identical herpes sores.[2] Indeed, sexual comedy – one of the oldest and most universal strains of humour – exists in gleeful abundance in *Spinal Tap*.

On another level, *This Is Spinal Tap* is one of the key modern examples of improvisational comedy, and Guest, McKean, Shearer and their co-stars such as Fred Willard and Billy Crystal, have been justly recognised as some of the finest practitioners of improvisation. The fact that the film was largely improvised is surely one of the reasons that the cult of *Spinal Tap* is so large and devout: the jokes summon not only our laughter but our appreciation when we know that they were invented on the spur of the moment. Though not as overtly 'comical' as the performances of great screen comedians such as Jerry Lewis and Bob Hope, the performances of the actors in *This Is Spinal Tap* are extremely rich, and not just because they are largely improvised. Many of the actors in the film play roles which are at once fictional *and* real: Harry Shearer assumes the fictional role of bassist Derek Smalls, but he also actually plays the bass.

Most obviously, and perhaps most challengingly, the film is a spot-on parody of great accomplishment, made all the more

compelling for its two-part parodic attack. The film takes on not just metal in particular and rock music in general, but, on another level, documentary filmmaking in general and the 'rockumentary' (if you will) in particular.

The film takes two different approaches to the two distinct targets of its parody. In parodying metal, the film relies on its viewers' knowledge of this genre, and of rock music in general. The more one knows about the state of metal in the early 1980s (and, specifically, the New Wave of British Heavy Metal,[3] as well as the British and American glam-pop metal bands which arose in its wake), the greater one's enjoyment upon viewing *This Is Spinal Tap*, and the likelier one is to understand the film's many references, both overt and subtle, to specific metal bands. In this way, the film rewards those with specialised knowledge, and thus greatly increases its chances of achieving cult status.

The film's approach to parodying the documentary form is somewhat different. One is not generally a 'fan' of documentaries in the same way one is a fan of heavy metal. Rather, the film asks that its viewers possess a general understanding of the ways in which documentaries use the devices of cinema to make truth claims about their subjects. It is the sort of understanding that comes from a general familiarity with the conventions of *cinéma vérité* and its cinematic and television descendents. In addition, the film asks for a certain basic understanding of the 'rockumentary', a subgenre arguably initiated with D. A. Pennebaker's *Dont Look Back* (1967). Marty DiBergi,[4] in the film's first scene, speaks this term as if it were enclosed by quotation marks, and his intonation clues us in to *Spinal Tap*'s essential irreverence: the film may appear on the surface to be a kind of pop-culture docu-hagiography of the type epitomised by the Maysles brothers' landmark *Gimme Shelter* (1970), but is in actuality a parody not only of the musical genre to which its subjects belong, but the

cinematic subgenre and genre to which it ostensibly belongs. A knowledge of the conventions of the documentary (as well as those of the rockumentary) provides an essential backdrop against which the film must be understood. This kind of subversion and icon-toppling is yet another essential component of the cult status of *This Is Spinal Tap*.

When a new acquaintance learns that I study film, he or she will often ask two questions. Firstly, 'What's your favourite movie?'; secondly, 'Are you able to go to the movies and just enjoy what you see, or are you always analysing everything?' I always brush off the first (how is it possible to have just one favourite movie?), but have an answer to the second: of course I can still enjoy watching movies, and of course I 'analyse' them as I watch. In fact, it is the act of analysis which makes my enjoyment of films that much fuller. Which is another way of saying that all of the subjects addressed above – the ways in which *This Is Spinal Tap* engages in discourses of music, film, documentary, parody – are central to my enjoyment of the film. *Spinal Tap* is funny and clever even if you don't know anything about rock music or recent documentary practice, but it's surely a funnier and richer experience if you do. Cult films provide perfect opportunities for studying the intersection of enjoyment and analysis. A detailed study of the factors that make such films enjoyable can tell us a great deal about the films' cultural statuses; analysis can and should explain why these films have generated such devoted followings. This is why I am a member of the cult of *This Is Spinal Tap*. The film intersects with and offers hilarious, intelligent commentary on two subjects which are of major importance to me: movies and rock music. It is also brilliantly, remarkably, awe-inspiringly funny.

Though I was a bit young when *This Is Spinal Tap* came out, I was and am one of many ideal spectators for the film. My generation (the Baby Boomers' children) is the first to have

grown up in a world in which rock 'n' roll music is omnipresent. My mother was born just before blues, country, gospel, jazz and what-have-you coalesced into the globe-encircling force now known as rock 'n' roll; I was born four years after Altamont and four years before the death of Elvis Presley. I've never known a world without rock music – some of my earliest memories are of listening to my parents' record collection. Rock 'n' roll has always been all around me, and I expect it always will be.

But this coincidence of timing gives me no special claim to the appreciation of *This Is Spinal Tap*: a Baby Boomer who was raised on Wolfman Jack and *American Bandstand* probably knows more than I do about the twisted, splintered evolution of rock music. I can, however, claim membership in that oft-scorned demographic, the 'MTV Generation', for, within days of that epochal channel's US launch, my sister and I mainlined it through the coax. By the time I was eight years old, rock music was, for me, something that was not just commonplace, but ubiquitous; not just aural, but visual. The first wave of music videos and 'veejays' introduced me to the genres, clichés and mad excesses of rock music. Of course, rock stars had appeared on television since the early 1950s, but they had not achieved the cultural prominence – or the dedicated cable channel – that they had by the early 1980s. As a kid who watched *a lot* of television – and, I like to think, as a reasonably intelligent person – I believe that, even at that age, I understood that MTV and the artists on it were out to make spectacles of themselves, and, in the process, sell a bunch of records, many of which I bought. I was being groomed for *Tap*-appreciation; the shallow glory of the MTV-era rock star, as well as that of the music industry itself, receive some of *Spinal Tap*'s sharpest barbs.

It is worth pointing out that the videos MTV played in its first few years were an eclectic bunch – hard to believe in this era

of round-the-clock Nickelback and Ashlee Simpson. At nine years old, I was a fan of Utopia, Joe Jackson, Wall of Voodoo, Judas Priest and Split Enz, among others – pretty unusual fare for a pre-teen. I was fascinated by this music partly because it sounded good to me, and partly because the videos memorably captured something about the 'spirit of rock 'n' roll'. This audio-visual crazy quilt introduced me to the multiplicity of rock genres, and to the bizarre trappings of each.

Heavy metal – or, at least, the hairsprayed, diluted version of it that surfaced on MTV and American pop radio stations – is a genre that I've always loved from a bit of a distance. I enjoyed songs by Judas Priest, Iron Maiden and Def Leppard, and it was definitely considered cool among the kids at summer camp to listen to such bands – and, even better, to wear black t-shirts emblazoned with their names. But I fairly rarely bought albums by those bands, and didn't hang out with the metalheads in school. Even when I liked the music, the genre of heavy metal seemed a little bit silly to me: that hair, those clothes, that noodly guitar; when I didn't like the music, it seemed downright ludicrous and occasionally unlistenable. Metal always was an especially easy genre to laugh at. I've come around, and now I appreciate metal more than I ever have. Especially interesting to me are its various subgenres that have sprung up in recent years: doom metal, stoner metal, and so on. As I have said, I believe that silliness is one of the essential and inseparable qualities of just about all rock music – or, at least, of rock music that does not take itself too seriously, which to me is a cardinal sin. But I will admit that I found then and still find now a great deal of heavy metal to be more than a little bit ridiculous. I appreciate the genre and like a good deal of the music, but I've never really been a huge fan.

In other words, I had the makings of a *Spinal Tap* cultist. The ambivalence I feel toward metal is fairly close to the am-

bivalence with which the film itself treats the genre. When it's good, it can be fantastic: Slayer, Iron Maiden, Black Sabbath. When it's bad, it's pretty cartoonish and risible. *Spinal Tap*'s attitude toward rock/metal is very similar to my own: mocking, yet reverential.

Spinal Tap must surely have been one of my earliest introductions to the mythologising of rock history. The film's 'archival footage' – in addition to being absolutely pitch-perfect in its recreation of period music, costume, attitude and even film stock – offers spot-on satire of the ways in which rock 'n' roll has evolved – and devolved. Now, I understand the jokes behind 'Gimme Some Money' and '(Listen to the) Flower People'; when I was younger, I was foggily aware that these songs and the presentations thereof were funny because they referred to a history of rock which remained tantalisingly obscure to me.

While an appreciation for and early exposure to the vicissitudes and extravagances of rock music is one of the principal reasons that *This Is Spinal Tap* has special meaning for me, the approach I take toward art in general is one which, I believe, serves me well in understanding the film. I've long been opposed to the separation of cultural products into 'high' and 'low' forms. A visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art is a wonderful, edifying experience, but so is reading Ernie Bushmiller's cartoon-strip 'Nancy'; Coltrane is magnificent, but so is Mott the Hoople.

I believe the seeds for opposing the 'high art'/'low art' dichotomy were planted when I was young, when I was exposed to plenty of art of both types. An early passion for movies, for instance, steered me toward Oscar-worthy classics and Serious Foreign Films, as well as to the Saturday television matinees: Godzilla/kung-fu double features. It was all cinema to me, and all equally enjoyable, so long as it was taken on its own terms.

This Is Spinal Tap is a very great film about a form of popular music that has rarely met with anything but disdain from the arbiters of taste – a fact especially true in the early 1980s. The film celebrates and lambasts its subject in equal measure. As Rob Reiner has said, 'Even though we're making fun of the subject matter, we all love rock 'n' roll!'; he has also referred to the film's lampoonery as 'the gentlest kind of antagonism'.[5] Anyone who believes the film's attitude toward its subject is one of pure mockery has not picked up on its genuine affection for its characters, or on the ways the film quite earnestly celebrates the gleeful inanity of the music of Spinal Tap. Indeed, by making it the subject of one of the most intelligent and incisive parodies of the last several decades, *Spinal Tap* elevates the cultural cachet of heavy metal itself.

Just as *This Is Spinal Tap* positions itself astride the 'high culture/low culture' line, it also assumes a complicated and deliberately confusing stance with regard to the split between fiction and nonfiction. I am almost certain that *Spinal Tap* was my first mock documentary: at the age I first saw it, I was not yet aware of such earlier films as Jim McBride's ahead-of-its-time *David Holzman's Diary* (1967), Peter Greenaway's marvellous *Vertical Features Remake* (1978) and *The Falls* (1980), Ruggero Deodato's challenging and underrated *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980), or Woody Allen's contemporaneous *Zelig* (1983), though even as a Jewish eleven-year-old in New York I was aware of Allen and several other of his films. *This Is Spinal Tap* is, for many people, the definitive mock documentary; it is still the one to which nearly all subsequent mock documentaries most often refer.

While the idea of fictionalised fact was itself anything but new, *Spinal Tap* served as an initiation into this form of comedy for me, and, I'd venture, for many people my age. It is difficult to say what it is, exactly, about *Spinal Tap*'s combina-

tion of the real and the fictional that made such an impact on me. Partly it was the shock of the new: I'd never seen this kind of thing done before, and was (and am) tremendously impressed at how well the filmmakers pull it off. Partly it was the very notion that such a thing could be done at all; I know I'd never have been able to think of it myself. Finally, it may have been my latent realisation that such a premise opens up a great many avenues for comedy which would not otherwise be explored in a more conventional fiction film – or which, simply, would not otherwise have been quite as funny.

For *Spinal Tap* is an incredibly funny film. The characters, situations, performances, music, costumes, dialogue, historical recreations, attention to detail – nearly every one of the film's principal ingredients is funny enough to stand up to repeated viewings, funny enough to make the movie a true landmark of film comedy. I believe it stands up extremely well next to the masterworks of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Bob Hope, Jerry Lewis and the other comic titans of the screen – it really is that good. While it's never particularly satisfying to explain why comedy is funny, I hope that, through careful analysis of the film and its cult(ural) status, we may gain some insight into the ways it has carved out for itself a unique and enviable position in the history of screen comedy.

This Is Spinal Tap is one of those films that may, by now, be taken for granted. Everyone has seen it, everyone loves it, everyone can make jokes about an object being 'none more black' and about something going 'up to eleven'. But it is worthwhile to revisit and analyse the film, and to see what it is that makes it so important to so many people. As I've suggested above, the act of analysis often enriches and complicates a text in such a way as to make it all the more admirable and compelling; I believe this to be true of *Spinal Tap*, and hope, over the next four chapters, to account for the fact that the film has amassed a large and ardent cult following.

2

PRODUCTION, PROMOTION, INITIAL RECEPTION

Though it was not born a cult film or deliberately intended to be one, *This Is Spinal Tap* was conceived, produced, marketed and released using aesthetic and economic strategies that contributed significantly to the film's (and band's) everlasting cult status. Like any commercial film, *This Is Spinal Tap* was released with the intention of turning a profit by attracting as many viewers as possible. Though the financial backers of any film surely desire their venture to inspire a devoted following, it is very difficult to make a cult film by design. Crucially, cult films are cult films because audiences, not studio executives, have made them so; *Spinal Tap* is no exception.[6] Nevertheless, those responsible for making the creative and financial decisions about the film could hardly have made more cult-friendly ones. At every major step in the development of the film (and the band) – conception, production, theatrical release, video release, Spinal Tap's subsequent albums and concert appearances – the 'cult value' of the film has received a boost.

WHAT DAY DID THE LORD CREATE *SPINAL TAP*?: PRODUCING THE FILM

By the mid-1970s, Rob Reiner was recognisable to many television viewers as Michael 'Meathead' Stivic on Norman Lear's popular and successful show *All in the Family* (1971–79), though he had been appearing on television and in films since 1959. Less well-known were his directorial efforts for television, including the short-lived 1981 series *Likely Stories*, co-written by Reiner and future Spinal Tap members Christopher Guest and Harry Shearer. *This Is Spinal Tap* is his first feature film.

Reiner is crucial to the cult status of *This Is Spinal Tap*. As the son of Carl Reiner – an extremely important figure in American film and television comedy – he was born into a comic tradition that has its roots in vaudeville. As a director, he made his mark with what may genuinely be called one of Hollywood's most auspicious film debuts.[7] Reiner's comic bloodline and tyro status account for no small portion of *Spinal Tap*'s cult status: a good comedy is an admirable thing, and it's always a pleasure to root for the underdog.

This Is Spinal Tap was made on a small budget: about $2.2 million (Harmetz 1984: C20). (As Eddie Dorman Kay notes, the top-grossing American film that same year, *Ghostbusters*, cost $32 million (1990: 173).[8]) Producer Karen Murphy has said that most of this sum went to the performers, who, per union rules, received salaries not only as actors, but as writers and musicians; much of the remainder of the costs were spent on location fees.[9] Though distributed by MGM, the film was produced by Embassy Pictures, an independent company founded in the 1940s. Between 1982 and 1985, Embassy was owned by Norman Lear, the important American television writer and producer, who had collaborated with Reiner *père* and *fils*; Lear may rightly be considered the unofficial

financial midwife of *This Is Spinal Tap* (Harmetz 1984: C20). The film was shot primarily on location at various sites around Los Angeles over a five-week period, a choice which not only saved the producers money, but which helps maintain the illusion that the film is a documentary.

Along with its comparatively low cost, another fact which adds 'cult value' to *This Is Spinal Tap* is the fact that it was shot on Super 16mm film stock, not Hollywood-standard 35mm film. In addition to reducing costs, the use of Super 16mm imparts to the film a do-it-yourself aesthetic; 16mm had long been the format favoured by film students and avant-garde or amateur filmmakers.[10] 16mm cameras are also lightweight and portable – two of the aesthetic elements most crucial to producing the 'realistic' effect that was so important in the rhetoric of the *cinéma vérité* movement, and therefore important to *Spinal Tap*'s aesthetic and central premise. The film's director of photography, Peter Smokler, had shot footage for the documentaries *Jimi Plays Berkeley* (1971) and *The Killing of America* (1982); he was hired to shoot *This Is Spinal Tap*, in part, for his familiarity with documentary style.[11]

When a Super 16mm image is blown up to 35mm for theatrical release, the grain of the film is magnified proportionally. This grainy, 'unrefined' look is another connection between *Spinal Tap* and *cinéma vérité*: the effect has deep associations with realism and immediacy, elements fundamental to the comedy of *This Is Spinal Tap*. Chapter Four discusses in detail the stylistic connections between *Spinal Tap* and *cinéma vérité* practice.

The quality of the film stock is not the only aesthetic element in *Spinal Tap* deliberately chosen for its non-professional appearance. Essential to the style – and cult status – of *Spinal Tap* is the fact that its performances were almost entirely improvised. The film's three leading performers – as well as many of the supporting players – have extensive improvi-

sational experience: pre-*Tap*, Michael McKean, Christopher Guest and Harry Shearer all appeared in the short-lived, partly improvised 1979 television show *The T.V. Show*; Shearer and McKean were members of the L.A. improv comedy troupe The Credibility Gap; Guest was involved with The National Lampoon; all three men have various connections to *Saturday Night Live* (1975–present). Rob Reiner, too, has extensive experience with improv: at 19, he founded his own improvisatory theatrical group, which included among its members Richard Dreyfuss (see Fischer 2003). Smokler's documentary experience complemented the actors' method: though Reiner provided some direction to Smokler during the shoot, the cinematographer shot the improvised performances as if they were 'real life' – which, in effect, they were. Guest has said, 'Peter's instincts were very, very good ... Because the improvisation mimics what would really happen, he was able to instinctively just do what he would do as a cameraman if this were a real documentary.'[12]

Most films are picked up for distribution on the strength of their screenplays, but there was no screenplay for *This Is Spinal Tap*. With the advance they received from Lord Lew Grade's Marble Arch Productions, Reiner, Guest, McKean and Shearer improvised and filmed a 20-minute demo reel in which they developed the appearance and personae of the members of Spinal Tap.[13] This short film, entitled *Spinal Tap: The Last Tour*, is the genesis of many scenes and jokes which would end up in *This Is Spinal Tap*. The jokes about the band's drummers' deaths, the cucumber-in-the-pants gag, the joke about the beautiful piano piece entitled 'Lick My Love Pump' – all of these come directly from *The Last Tour*. It was this demo reel that convinced Embassy Pictures to finance the film that would become *This Is Spinal Tap*.

For a first-time director, Reiner made a bold choice in eschewing altogether a formal screenplay. In place of a script,

'the actors wrote for themselves a complete history of the fictional band and the life history of every musician who had played with the band over a 20-year period' (Harnetz 1984: C20). Reiner's description of the creative process is worth quoting at length:

> [For each scene, there] was an outline which laid out the objective of the scene. I was in charge of tracing the attitudes of the characters so in any given scene the attitude would be the same. The big danger was that we'd have a '90-minutes-out-of-their-life sketch' and not characters that people could care about. We shot each scene three or four times. The first time, I'd just turn on the camera and see what happened. The second time, we added things or changed focus. The third time was to get variations and the fourth time was for cutaway shots. (In ibid.)

The cult value of this creative process is that it is an alternative to mainstream practice, and that it permits a certain privileged glimpse into the creative processes of genuinely talented artists.

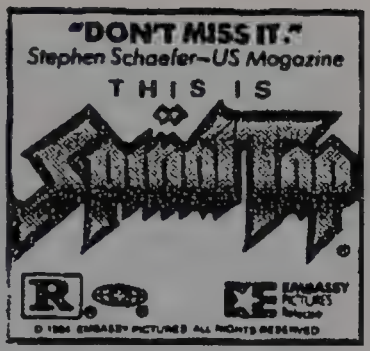
MARKETING AND THEATRICAL RELEASE

This Is Spinal Tap was released in the US on 2 March 1984, playing, at first, at only a handful of theatres in or near large metropolitan areas. In its opening weekend the film grossed $30,835 on just three screens, a formidable per-screen average of over $10,000. At its widest release, the film played on about 200 screens – a modest figure.[14] (*Ghostbusters*, by comparison, played on 1,339 screens and had a nearly identical per-screen average for its opening weekend.[15]) Over the course of its 1984 release, which lasted until early June, *Spi-*

nal Tap grossed just under $4.5 million – a small sum, but one which represents a favourable cost-to-return ratio of about 1:2.[16]

Such numbers can reveal a great deal about the initial reception of the film. The combination of the small gross and high per-screen average indicates that, on its initial release, *Spinal Tap* was seen by relatively few people, but that it aroused a great deal of interest in the cities in which it played. A small but devoted audience such as this is not a prerequisite for a film's achieving cult status, but it surely provides a solid foundation. A limited release connotes a special or unusual film – something different from the fare shown in multiplexes (even if *This Is Spinal Tap* was distributed by MGM). Distribution patterns – and simple geography – meant that a relatively small percentage of the country's moviegoers were able to see the film upon its initial release – a situation which can and often does lead to favourable buzz about a film: a difficult-to-see film can generate a significant cult cachet.[17] All other things being equal, the fact that *This Is Spinal Tap* saw only a limited initial release probably played a significant role in the creation of the film's cult.

The first wave of print ads for *This Is Spinal Tap* reveal very little about the film – indeed, they are small and exceedingly plain, perhaps as an indicator of the film's low budget. For instance, the *New York Times* ad of 5 March 1984 (three days after the film's premiere) consists entirely of the film's title/logo and the Embassy Pictures insignia – it does not even offer a hint about the genre of the film (Figure 2.1).[18] A print ad from May 1984 – by which time the film had generated good reviews and substantial buzz – merely adds a critic's vague blurb 'Don't miss it' (Figure 2.2).[19] The only clue to the film's subject matter is the typeface used for the band's name, a two-toned metallic-look font which refers to the logos of such metal bands as Van Halen, AC/DC and Dokken.[20] The



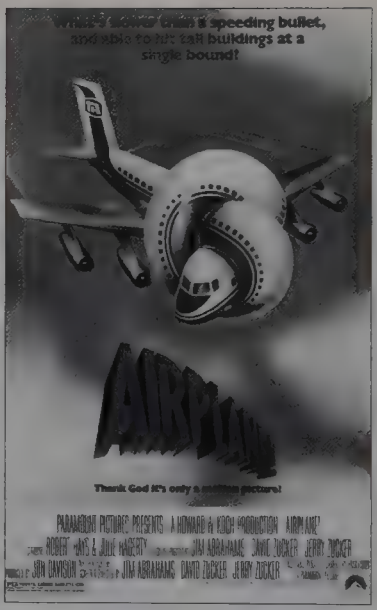
Figures 2.1 and 2.2: Advertisements for *This Is Spinal Tap* from the *New York Times*, 5 March 1984 and 13 May 1984, respectively

only indication that the film is a comedy is a subtle one: that famous umlaut resting incongruously over the 'n'.[21]

Reiner has said that he feels *This Is Spinal Tap* was poorly marketed, calling particular attention to the film's original poster.[22] The poster (Figure 2.3) depicts a guitar with a twisted neck, and is so reminiscent of the poster for the 1980 film *Airplane!* (Figure 2.4) as to summon charges of plagiarism. Reiner argues that a poster so similar to *Airplane!*'s, released while that film and its 1982 sequel (the poster for which used a similar design) were still culturally current, would encourage viewers to believe that *Spinal Tap* was a 'zany', scattershot comedy of the *Airplane!* type, when in fact it is nothing of the kind. Even a cursory comparison of the two films' posters shows Reiner's grievance to be well founded.

Promotional materials, such as posters and trailers, provide more insight into the film's particular style of irreverent comedy, not least through the use of blurbs such as David Ansen's oft-quoted 'The funniest movie ever made about rock and roll' (1984: 81).[23] A particular favourite is the tagline: 'Does for rock and roll what *The Sound of Music* did for hills.'

The first thirty seconds of the three-minute trailer for *Spinal Tap* have the potential to convince the uninitiated view-

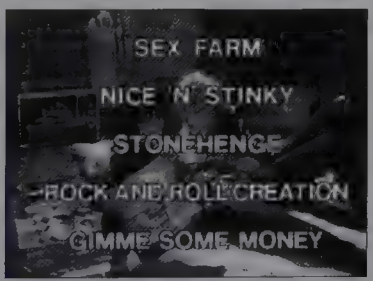


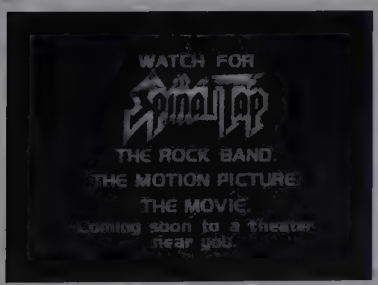
Figures 2.3 and 2.4: The original posters for *This Is Spinal Tap* and *Airplane!*

er that the film being advertised is a documentary, but the next twenty seconds are devoted to the now-famous scene of the band losing their way from the dressing room to the stage at a Cleveland concert hall. From this point forward, the trailer focuses on the humorous and clearly fictional events that befall the band (the explosion of drummer Mick Shrimpton; Mc-Kean saying, 'Well, I'm sure I'd feel much worse if I weren't under such heavy sedation'); furthermore, the voice-over announcer adopts a consistently tongue-in-cheek tone. (American television commercials for the film were made with much the same approach.)[24] A savvy viewer who saw this trailer in early 1984 would have known that *This Is Spinal Tap* was clearly a parody of rock documentaries, and of the hagiography of rock stars in general.

The cleverest and most interesting promotional item for the film is a commercial for Spinal Tap's career-spanning 'great-

est hits' album, *Heavy Metal Memories*. Shown on late-night American television in early 1984, the ad is a pitch-perfect parody of the record commercials that plagued the airwaves at that time: low-budget video effects, an overbearing voice-over, scrolling text and a couple posing in 'romantic' settings. Here, though, it is a metalhead couple who stroll in front of a rear-projected beach (Figure 2.5) and cuddle by a roaring fire (Figure 2.6). Though full of ludicrous jokes (such as the disclaimer 'ALL CHART LISTINGS APPROXIMATE') and songs with titles that would have kept them off of any chart ('The Incredible Flight of Icarus P. Anybody', 'Nice 'n' Stinky'), the commercial is so cleverly made as to be believable.[25] The ad ends with the image seen in Figure 2.7, thereby making it both a commercial and a mock-commercial. The *Heavy Metal Memories* spot is noteworthy for the fact that, like Spinal Tap themselves, it might best be described as 'semi-fictional': one of the principal jokes of the film is echoed in part of its ad campaign. Its pinpoint parody, exceptional cleverness and





Figures 2.5, 2.6 amd 2.7: Images from the 'Heavy Metal Memories' commercial

late-night airtime secured for this ad a central place in the cult of *Tap*.

With the important exception of the *Heavy Metal Memories* ad, none of these advertising materials suggest that *This Is Spinal Tap* is a documentary: playing along with this gag was not a major part of the film's promotional strategy at all. Indeed, the poster and trailer for the film state quite plainly that it stars Michael McKean, Christopher Guest and Harry Shearer – *not* David St. Hubbins, Nigel Tufnel and Derek Smalls. Were *This Is Spinal Tap* an actual rockumentary, these materials would conceivably promote the band members as its stars, just as other rock films' posters often do: the original poster for *The Last Waltz* (1978), for instance, places the word 'Starring' before the names of the members of The Band. Though the mock documentary nature of *Spinal Tap* is one of the principal reasons for the film's cult status, this fact was never, in the eyes of its producers, a selling point of the film. Rather, the film was, on the whole, marketed as an irreverent but not necessarily unusual comedy.

CRITICAL RESPONSE

The limited release of *This Is Spinal Tap* did not prevent the film from attracting a good deal of critical attention and praise. Generally speaking, the contemporaneous reviews of the film are very positive, a fact which in all likelihood contributed to the film's favourable word-of-mouth reputation and to its burgeoning cult. Reiner has said, 'I don't remember ever reading a bad review for this film', speculating that this was the case not just because it is a good film, but because the best way for critics to show that they got the joke was for them to praise the film.[26] Editor Robert Leighton singles out Vincent Canby's favourable review in the *New York Times* for attracting attention to the film.[27]

Three tropes stand out by their recurrence in these reviews: the accuracy with which the film depicts the world of heavy metal; *Spinal Tap*'s kinship with films of the *cinéma vérité* movement; and the genuine affection that the filmmakers appear to feel for the characters. The *BFI Monthly Film Bulletin*, the *New York Post*, *New York Newsday* and *Films and Filming*, among others, refer to the film's authenticity and attention to detail.[28] The full text of David Ansen's aforementioned *Newsweek* blurb is, 'This is surely the funniest movie ever made about rock and roll, and one of the funniest things about it is that it may also be one of the most accurate' (1984: 81). In addition, the film's pointed takes on both rockumentaries and documentaries are rendered all the more intelligent by its attention to detail.

The frequent comparisons between *Spinal Tap* and the films of the *cinéma vérité* movement – films such as D. A. Pennebaker's *Dont Look Back*, Frederick Wiseman's *High School* (1968) and David and Albert Maysles' *Salesman* (1969) – are somewhat more complex than most critics seem to acknowledge. Ansen, for instance, praises Reiner for replicating the *cinéma vérité* style 'so knowingly that the film becomes a satire of the documentary form itself ... Reiner won't sacrifice the pseudodocumentary surface for a gag, with the result that the story of the band's pathetic tour achieves moments of surprising poignancy' (ibid.). Yet this is not strictly true. Reiner 'violates' the aesthetic and narrative tenets of *cinéma vérité* on many occasions (as discussed in chapter four). All the same, a sort of generalised *cinéma vérité* aesthetics are clearly a very important influence on the style of *This Is Spinal Tap* – a topic also discussed in detail in chapter four. *Cinéma vérité* has cultivated – not entirely genuinely – connotations of an 'outsider' filmmaking aesthetic that can grant unfettered access to the truth. For this and other reasons, certain films by Wiseman, the Maysles brothers and

other *vérité* filmmakers have themselves attracted small cult followings. *This Is Spinal Tap*, then, can have it both ways: it taps into *cinéma vérité*'s own cult associations, but, at the same time, parodies them. The wit and intelligence with which the film accomplishes this has, no doubt, attracted a great many admirers.

In the the *New York Times*, Janet Maslin, in her very favourable review, writes that the film 'isn't mean-spirited at all. It's much too affectionate for that ... The most appealing thing about *This Is Spinal Tap*, aside from the obvious enthusiasm of all concerned, is the accompanying lack of condescension' (1984: C6). Robert Christgau and Carola Dibbell, in the *Village Voice*, express a similar sentiment: 'What could have been pure parody turned into corrupt parody, which is to say that the film's creators came to rather like and even respect their targets. Rarely have pretentious people been portrayed so affectionately' (1984: 52). Such observations seem quite accurate: *This Is Spinal Tap*'s complex attitude towards its subject matter – a combination of ridicule, respect and good-natured ribbing – is a major reason that the film appeals to so many loyal fans.

Essential to the humour of the film is that Spinal Tap is by no means a terrible band, nor are its members evil or unpleasant people. Rather, they are relentlessly mediocre musicians who are clueless about just how mediocre they are. In picking up on this approach towards the film's characters, these and other critics get at the heart of the film's comedy. David Denby's nutshell description of the film seems particularly apt:

> Like many good parodies, *This Is Spinal Tap*, an excruciatingly funny send-up of dreadful rock groups and rock documentaries, is so accurate it almost becomes the thing it satirises. The movie was made with equal parts

> of love and disgust; seeing it is a dizzying, joyous experience. (1984: 65)

The most informed and prescient of the reviews surveyed for this book is *Variety*'s: its author, 'Cart.', correctly forecasts the film's 'spotty' box-office potential and predicts that the film will inspire a devoted following. '*Spinal Tap* joins such previous pics as *American Hot Wax* [1978] and *Get Crazy* [1983] as films that were weak commercial entries but continue to be cherished by the cognescenti [sic] for their astute observations of music world realities and foibles' (1984: 14). Moreover, 'Cart.' astutely detects not only the film's resemblances to a *cinéma vérité* film, but its stylistic 'violations' of the *cinéma vérité* ethos: '[The] rough, from-the-hip shooting style perfectly fits the subject, even if, on a formal level, the real life docu approach is occasionally violated by cross cutting and other, more conventional, techniques' (ibid.).

Many of the stylistic and economic choices made during the production, marketing and release of *This Is Spinal Tap* had the effect of generating a cult-like audience, an effect which was bolstered by the film's initial critical reception. This audience was anything but guaranteed: many other low-budget comedies were released during this time, and many of these enjoyed second lives on home video; but not all of them became cult films.[29]

Determining exactly how and why *Spinal Tap* acquired cult status – and other films did not – is a tricky business, as such a thing does not happen in a measurable, mathematical way. This chapter has suggested a number of specific factors which, all other things being equal, may have tended to create a cult audience for *Spinal Tap*.

But we should not overlook another important factor: *This Is Spinal Tap* is an extremely funny movie, and good comedy is not only timeless, but worth revisiting. Many of the gags

in *Spinal Tap* possess the remarkable ability to remain funny even when seen, heard, cited or quoted for the tenth, twentieth or hundredth time. While this ultimately boils down to matters of personal taste, the fact that so many people find the film so enduringly funny is at the very heart of its reputation – a fact which supersedes any details of the film's production, distribution and exhibition in creating its cult.

3

'DO "STONEHENGE!"': AUDIENCES AND CRITICS RESPOND TO *THIS IS SPINAL TAP*

This Is Spinal Tap is unusual in that enthusiasm for it has cut across cultural strata: it has been celebrated on a 'grassroots' level (as evinced by the sales and rental figures of its multiple video editions, a topic addressed below), as well as on an 'official' level: in 2002, the Library of Congress added the film to its National Film Registry as a 'culturally significant' work. While it has not yet been celebrated with in-theatre sing-along re-enactments, as has *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), nor been honoured with an annual, weekend-long festival, as has *The Big Lebowski* (1999), it is, perhaps, only a matter of time.[30]

This chapter looks at the critical and popular reception of *This Is Spinal Tap*, and is guided by a number of questions. How have audiences responded to the film, and have their opinions changed over time? What are some of the ways that audiences have devised to celebrate *Spinal Tap*? In what ways, ultimately, is *This Is Spinal Tap* important to its fans?

VIDEO RELEASE AND CULT REPUTATION

Before investigating further the critical and popular responses to *This Is Spinal Tap*, it is important to account for the film's increased availability in the years since its theatrical exhibition, for *Spinal Tap* was released on video at precisely the right time to capitalise on one of the first major home-video booms.

One of the effects of the initial critical enthusiasm for *Spinal Tap* is that it generated a great deal of favourable word-of-mouth which, in turn, gave a major boost to the film's video rentals and sales. The first wave of critical enthusiasm is addressed in chapter two; each re-release gave rise to a subsequent flurry of reviews for the film, nearly all of them positive. In fact, though the seeds of the *Spinal Tap* cult were sown during its theatrical release, it is the video release which may be the first stage of the formation of its cult. The reason is very simple: with its release on video, the film became far more widely available than it had been previously. Anyone whose curiosity had been piqued by the critical praise for the film could now, at minimal cost, see it for him- or herself. As a result, the cult reputation of *This Is Spinal Tap* was bolstered immensely. In fact, the film's cult cachet has been enhanced by each of its several subsequent video releases – two of which have themselves attained cult status.

This Is Spinal Tap was released on VHS in October 1984, firmly within the era which Frederick Wasser, in his book *Veni, Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR*, refers to as 'the golden years of home-video production': the period between 1981 and 1986, in which film distribution companies came to realise the immense profit potential of this new market (2001: 104). During this period, the market penetration of the VCR in the US (Table 3.1) increased dramatically (Wasser 2001: 68).

1981	3.1%
1982	5.7%
1983	9.9%
1984	17.6%
1985	27.3%
1986	37.2%
1987	51.7%

Table 3.1: Percentage of television-owning US households which also owned VCRs

The seventeenfold increase from 1981 to 1987 is nothing short of phenomenal, and the percentages kept rising for years after that: by 1992, three-quarters of US television-owning households also had at least one VCR. Embassy Pictures, which funded *Spinal Tap*, was an early and important independent player in the home-video boom. Wasser describes the company as 'aggressive in acquiring films and grabbing market share'; between 1983 and 1986, Embassy averaged a significant four per cent of the videocassette market (2001: 108).

There is a direct correspondence between the remarkable growth of the home-video industry and the growth of the cult of *This Is Spinal Tap*. Though the film had only a limited theatrical release, the growing ubiquity of VCRs and video-rental stores made it accessible to any film enthusiast with three dollars. In that a fan could now own or repeatedly rent his or her favourite film, the ability of the home-video boom to solidify and create cult films should not be underestimated. If a requirement for membership in the cult of *Spinal Tap* is the ability to quote its dialogue and sing its songs, then its appearance on video is essential to its cult status: in many ways, the REWIND button is a cultist's best friend.

If *Spinal Tap*'s release on videotape introduced the film to a new generation of viewers and thereby intensified its cult following, the release of the film on laserdisc in 1994 brought the film into the realm of the near-legendary. The supplement-laden, two-disc, now-out-of-print CAV Criterion laserdisc implicitly treated the film like a major cultural landmark.[31] The laserdisc format itself was, at the time, considered the cinephile's alternative to VHS, in that it reproduced picture and sound with far greater fidelity; generally presented films in their proper aspect ratios; did not degrade with repeated viewings; and often contained commentary tracks and other bonus features for the true film enthusiast. In these ways, laserdisc anticipated DVD without reaching anything close to the same level of market penetration. It was also the format of choice for viewers whose love of certain films ran deep.

The Criterion laserdisc of *This Is Spinal Tap* (the second of three laserdisc versions of the film) is a special edition indeed: it contains over an hour of deleted scenes, two audio commentaries, the entire screenplay, short works such as the *Heavy Metal Memories* commercial and the legendary 20-minute demo reel which convinced Embassy Pictures to finance the film. The fact that this extras-packed laserdisc was available for only a short time has made it a collectors' item, thereby increasing the cult value of both the disc and the film.

Many of the laserdisc's supplementary features also showed up on Criterion's 1998 DVD of *This Is Spinal Tap*, which has also since gone out of print. (As of July 2006, it was attracting bids of about $75 on eBay.) Merely having the Criterion stamp on these two editions renders them fetish objects, as the company has made its reputation by releasing the highest-quality home-viewing versions of 'important classic and contemporary films' (as their slogan has it). Criterion

has been largely responsible for shepherding the cult of *This Is Spinal Tap* into the video age.

Just as there are four VHS editions of the film, and two non-Criterion laserdiscs, there is another DVD version of *Spinal Tap*. MGM's 'Special Edition' DVD, released in 2000, contains some but not all of Criterion's bonus features; still, it contains more than an hour of deleted scenes as well as a commentary track that the three leads perform in character. For an inexpensive disc, it contains an unusual amount of extra material: even the most 'normal' video version of *Spinal Tap* is still treated as an unusual film that merits special attention.

How popular is *This Is Spinal Tap*? As of 1 September 2006, the 2000 MGM 'Special Edition' DVD ranked a very respectable 547th in DVD sales on Amazon.com.[32] Even more impressive is *Spinal Tap*'s ranking with Netflix, the largest DVD-by-mail rental company in the US, with which the film ranks 'in the top 1% of all Netflix titles in terms of total rentals to date and current queue demand'.[33]

Many films acquire their cult audiences through their very *un*availability on video – such inaccessibility lends them a certain cult cachet. The cult of *Spinal Tap* has been generated in precisely the opposite way: the film's wide availability has created, sustained and broadened its cult appeal.

While home viewing is surely the most important factor in *This Is Spinal Tap*'s continued popularity, it is not the only factor. The film is a mainstay of the university and repertory circuit. Though another Rob Reiner film, *The Princess Bride* (1987), is rented with much greater frequency, *This Is Spinal Tap* remains fairly popular: in 2005, for instance, it played 24 times at various university and repertory theatres.[34] By a strange coincidence, within two weeks of the writing of these words, the autumn 2006 film series at the local university, Wesleyan, commenced with a showing of *This Is Spinal Tap*. The promotional poster for the series describes every

other film with one short paragraph apiece, but *Spinal Tap*'s blurb consists solely of four lines from 'Sex Farm' – so recognisable and beloved is *Spinal Tap* that no more is necessary. The poster proffers brief but articulate testimony to the film's enduring significance.

'TREADING WATER IN A SEA OF RETARDED SEXUALITY AND BAD POETRY': CRITICS RESPOND TO *THIS IS SPINAL TAP*

Over more than two decades, the overall critical and popular attitude towards *This Is Spinal Tap* has remained remarkably consistent. As we have seen, *Spinal Tap* was, upon its initial release, met with nearly universally positive critical and popular opinion – a status which can be claimed by only a very few works of art in any medium. If anything, appreciation for the film has grown ever stronger in the years since its release. A survey of all second- and third-wave reviews would be prohibitively difficult to compile; a sampling must suffice.[35]

The 2000 review of *This Is Spinal Tap* in *Film Review* refers to it as 'the greatest mockumentary of them all', and peppers its paragraphs with references to famous lines and gags from the film: the film rates not ten but eleven stars (Caro 2000: 22). On the website for the magazine *Total Film*, reviewer Andy Lowe (2000) writes that 'time hasn't dulled the agonising richness of the songs, the toe-stiffening stupidity of the on-stage concepts, or the endless pith of Tufnel and St. Hubbins' wisdom. Even if you've seen it an unhealthy number of times, have another go.' In 1996, *Comedy Review* even went so far as to anoint the film as the funniest ever made (Atkins *et al.* 1996: 58–9). Though *Spinal Tap* has (somewhat surprisingly) not quite secured a place on the Internet Movie Database's 'Top 250 Movies of All Time' list, its 7.8 (out of ten) overall rating is high enough to rank it among the top fifty films from the 1980s.[36]

One interesting difference between the initial reviews and those of the second and third waves is that, in the former, reviewers do not play along with the central joke of the film; in the latter groups of reviews, it is quite common for the reviewer to, for instance, refer to Marty DiBergi – not Rob Reiner – as the director of *This Is Spinal Tap*. A review of the DVD in *Empire* ('SB' 2000: 23), for instance, quotes not Harry Shearer and Michael McKean but Derek Smalls and David St. Hubbins; even the staid *New York Times* has played along with the gag: a 1992 article, published on the occasion of the release of *Break Like the Wind*, is an interview with St. Hubbins, Smalls and Tufnel (Schoemer 1992: H33). In the sixteen years between the film's releases, it had passed thoroughly enough into the public consciousness that self-referential, joking reviews were not only unproblematic, but *de rigueur* – as sure a sign as any that the *Spinal Tap* cult had taken deep root.

What accounts for the fact that popular and critical opinion of *This Is Spinal Tap* has become increasingly favourable? Two explanations seem especially likely. The first is that every time the film has been released on video, it has undergone a kind of textual expansion. With the addition of such features as director and actor commentaries, supplementary footage and deleted scenes, the central text – the 1984 film *This Is Spinal Tap* – has been expanded, enriched and complicated. In this way, the film has maintained its identity while simultaneously solidifying its existing fan base and broadening its appeal to new viewers.

That *Spinal Tap*'s several VHS, laserdisc and DVD releases have burnished its already significant cult reputation is not unique: the same is true of, for instance, *Blade Runner* (1982). *Spinal Tap*, though, is slightly different. The most important dynamic is not that of different versions of the film (release cut vs. director's cut, for example), as with *Blade Runner*. Rather, each new release of the film has provided

enthusiasts with many new potential sites for fandom by increasing the size and scope of *Spinal Tap*'s 'universe'. With this in mind, let us briefly consider *Spinal Tap* alongside a more recent cult film, *The Matrix* (1999).

The diegetic world of *The Matrix* has expanded to become a true *multiverse*: it now includes, to name but a few titles, the DVD-only release *The Animatrix* (2003), video games such as *Enter the Matrix* (2003) and *The Matrix: Path of Neo* (2005) and several graphic novels. In each of these texts, the diegesis of the original film is significantly expanded and complicated; fans who engage with multiple texts are rewarded for their devotion with a more comprehensive understanding of the *Matrix* universe.

In this way (and, perhaps, *only* in this way), *Spinal Tap* is similar to *The Matrix*. Each expansion of the central text – the film's multiple versions, the albums *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984) and *Break Like the Wind* (1992), the band's concert tours and so on – offers more sites upon which fandom may flourish.[37] The comparison with *The Matrix* is not as far-fetched as it sounds: in both cases, a fictional text is expanded, complicated and enriched. The key difference is that the central text in the *Spinal Tap* multiverse is putatively nonfictional, a fact well understood by fans. This expansion of the text, then, affords fans further opportunities to demonstrate their understanding of the film's central joke, and even to reiterate or reconfigure it. See, for instance, the remarkably comprehensive 'Spinal Tap discography' page at Wikipedia, which painstakingly compiles the details concerning more than forty non-existent Spinal Tap albums, right down to record labels, track listings and even catalogue numbers.[38] That *Spinal Tap* fans are given numerous opportunities to participate in its humour is one of the main reasons for the film's continued popularity.

The other principal reason for the undiminished – if not increased – popular and critical enthusiasm for *Spinal Tap* is

closely related to the first, and has to do with what we might call the film's overall tone. Never do the creators of *This Is Spinal Tap* talk down to their viewers, or assume that the viewers do not get the film's pivotal joke. Chapter four argues that, though *Spinal Tap* goes to no lengths whatsoever to maintain the illusion that it is a mock documentary, its status as a mock documentary nevertheless crucially informs how we understand the film. Here, then, is a case in point: the film's creators are well aware that we, as intelligent viewers, are in on the central joke – indeed, the film would be far less funny, or even unfunny, were we not aware of it. By steadfastly, yet jokingly, maintaining that Spinal Tap is a rock band as real as any other (and all evidence supports such an assertion), the filmmakers provide fans with multiple avenues of entry into the film's comedy. It is unsurprising, given this attitude of winking inclusion, that *This Is Spinal Tap* has become a cult film.

This gregarious tone extends to the subjects of the film. *Spinal Tap* may hold them up to ridicule, but it does so rather lovingly. While the members of Spinal Tap are a bit self-important and addle-brained, they are never venal or cruel. Similarly, the film's attitude towards rock 'n' roll itself is one of fond taunting: a simultaneous celebration of its importance and deflation of its excesses. *This Is Spinal Tap* is respectful towards its characters and their music; to temper this respect with affectionate lampoonery is by no means an oxymoronic gesture. Viewers have certainly picked up on this tone and, whether consciously or not, have made it a central part of their appreciation for the film.

TAPHEADS

As with any cult object, fans of *This Is Spinal Tap* have devised many ways to celebrate the film. The one thing that

these fan-created texts have in common is that they demonstrate that their creators are in on the joke.

The best-known such text is probably Peter Occhiogrosso's 1985 book *Inside Spinal Tap*, which never flags in treating both Spinal Tap's history and the film *This Is Spinal Tap* as nonfictional. The book, which was expanded for reprinting in 1992, 'republishes' articles from, for instance, the November 1967 issue of *Teen Scope* ('My Beautiful Experience with Spinal Tap', by Yolanda Pavanne, age 16), and, in the manner of hastily published cash-in books on popular bands, contains glossy, full-colour photographs of the band in concert. *Inside Spinal Tap* is to rock fanzines what *This Is Spinal Tap* is to documentaries, and, clearly, this was the intention.[39] Occhiogrosso's book is not, perhaps, a true fan text, in that it was made with the participation of some of the creators of *This Is Spinal Tap*, and in that its author received a publication and distribution deal – but perhaps the importance of this economic-based argument is overstated. Tonally, the book is most certainly of a piece with the more grassroots fan texts described below; in interviews, Occhiogrosso himself comes across quite plainly as a *Spinal Tap* fan.

Of the 'unofficial' fan celebrations of *This Is Spinal Tap*, the most thoroughgoing is surely Chip Rowe's www.spinaltapfan.com, a website so comprehensive that www.spinaltap.com automatically redirects to it. Indeed, spinaltapfan.com offers a model for internet-based fandom: it participates in the humour of the film, but is also thoroughly researched and authoritative; moreover, its centrepiece, the 190-page document *Spinal Tap A to Zed: A guide to one of England's loudest bands*, is available for free download (and is dedicated to 'Tapheads everywhere'). Searching through Rowe's guide and website is as convincing a demonstration as any of the good-natured ardour with which *Spinal Tap* fans celebrate both the film and the band.[40]

Less organised than spinaltapfan.com – but no less devoted to the Cult of *Tap* – are the many homemade celebrations of the film to be found online. Though spinaltapfan.com has rendered most of them obsolete and infrequently updated, *Spinal Tap* fan-sites date back to at least 1994, and demonstrate the film's global reach: one of the earliest and more comprehensive was designed by a Norwegian fan. In 1996, a group of *Spinal Tap* fans used the internet to circulate a petition (or, rather, a 'harassment campaign') asking Rob Reiner to release the four-and-a-half-hour version of the film on video.[41] To this day, there are numerous sites from which one can download *Tap*-related soundbites, video clips, ringtones and so forth.

The Usenet discussion group alt.fan.spinal-tap ('The newsgroup that goes to 11') has been active since 1992, and offers an unparalleled window onto the day-to-day development of the film's fan culture.[42] Posts from the group's first two or three years are, often, little more than quotings or paraphrasings of lines of dialogue from the film; even the forum's first earnest attempt to establish a 'Frequently Asked Questions' section quickly devolves into members showing off their abilities to quote dialogue – the more obscure, the better.[43] Even this small outpost of online Tapheads reveals something about the nature of the fandom that *Spinal Tap* has inspired. As is the case with many cult movies, one's devotion to the film can be measured by the obscurity of the references one makes to it. More interestingly, alt.fan.spinal-tap offers further evidence that an essential component of *Spinal Tap* fandom is the joking insistence that the band's decades-long history is genuine, that its back catalogue exists, that the film is an authentic documentary. The film's fans adopt towards their subjects the same attitude and tone that the film does.

The hierarchy of fandom detailed above progresses from the official (the *Inside Spinal Tap* book) to the vernacular (Usenet);

continuing this progression, we may look to websites that encourage user inventiveness and participation: what we find is a true hodgepodge, but is no less fascinating for it.

Simply typing 'spinal tap' into the search field at *zeitgeist*-barometer website www.youtube.com yields a large number of audiovisual tributes to *Spinal Tap* (and Spinal Tap). Fans have uploaded to the site not only their favourite scenes from the film (for example, the scene of Derek at airport security, or a re-edited assemblage of all the film's musical numbers), but lesser-seen extracts from the extended version of the film, portions of the bonus features from various disc releases and many scenes of Spinal Tap in concert, generally excerpted from the 1992 video release *The Return of Spinal Tap*. Uploading clips such as these is, on the one hand, another way of 'quoting' the film; on the other, it is a gesture of inclusion and gospel-spreading: copyright laws be damned – fans of *Spinal Tap* (and any beloved film; try entering 'Casablanca' into the search field) will use any available means to make it accessible to the world.

Far more interesting are the many YouTube clips of rock bands of various skill levels performing cover versions of 'Stonehenge' and 'Big Bottom'; skinny Americans adopting poor British accents to simply repeat lines of dialogue from the film; and a number of short mock documentaries done 'in the manner of *Spinal Tap*' (not to mention the air-guitar tributes to the band). These brief, occasionally funny clips indicate the degree to which the phenomenon of *Spinal Tap* has permeated the popular consciousness, and the sincere affection which its fans feel for the film, the band and the music.[44] While none of these *Tap*-inspired works is nearly as clever as the original film, they provide ample evidence of *Spinal Tap*'s status as major cultural touchstone.

This affection for all things *Tap* has manifested itself in numerous ways, some of which further blur the line between

reality and fiction (if not between stupid and clever) – which is precisely the point. In at least one regard, Spinal Tap have officially joined the ranks of the Beatles, Led Zeppelin, Fleetwood Mac and heavy metal bands such as Black Sabbath, AC/DC, Judas Priest and Metallica: they have inspired a 'tribute band'. The semi-cleverly named Vinyl Tap is (or was) a band whose *raison d'être* is to pay homage to a semi-fictional heavy metal band which was itself a parody.[45] This may be a sign that rock 'n' roll has begun to eat its own tail.

In fact, *This Is Spinal Tap* has attained special cult status among rock musicians – an unconfirmed urban legend holds that a video of the film is standard equipment on nearly every band's tour bus. Whether or not this is true, the appeal of the film for rock musicians is obvious; indeed, to rock musicians, the film probably seems, at times, more like a drama – even a tragedy – than it does a comedy. Sting, according to Rob Reiner, has seen the film around fifty times, 'and when he watched it, he didn't know whether to laugh or cry, because it was so close to his experiences'.[46] Aerosmith guitarist Brad Whitford has said, 'I'd swear those Spinal Tap guys were at half our meetings. The funniest thing is, the first time [Aerosmith lead singer] Steven [Tyler] saw it he didn't see any humour in it. That's how close to home it was. He was pissed! He was like, "That's not funny!"' (in Norris 1997: 58). If we can take their online tour diaries at face value, anecdotal evidence suggests that, for many rock musicians, *Spinal Tap* is never very far from their minds, especially when they're on tour. Musicians as disparate as the Darkness and Moby make reference to the film on their websites: the Darkness's site makes allusions to 'Stonehenge', and Moby earns Taphead points by dropping a reference to Artie Fufkin.[47]

This Is Spinal Tap has become not only a cultural milestone, but a film of great meaning and importance to critics, rock stars and everyday cinephiles. It should be clear that there is

one reason for the film's following that outweighs all the others. Not only is *Spinal Tap* extremely funny, but it is funny in ways that allow and even encourage its viewers to take part in it. By making a film about a subject (rock 'n' roll) that has great meaning for many people, which does not talk down to its viewers and which provides ample opportunities to participate in its central joke, the creators of *This Is Spinal Tap* have fashioned one of the definitive cult films of all times.

4

'THAT'S NITPICKING, ISN'T IT?': ANALYSIS OF *THIS IS SPINAL TAP*

That *This Is Spinal Tap* is a fiction film masquerading as a documentary is essential to any analysis of the film. Though the documentary illusion of *Spinal Tap* disintegrates very early on in the film (within the first twenty seconds, if we recognise the fellow in the USS Coral Sea cap as Rob Reiner and not Marty DiBergi), it nevertheless uses a great many stylistic conventions of the documentary film. A knowledge of trends and conventions in documentary filmmaking practice – especially those of the *cinéma vérité* movement – is vital to understanding *This Is Spinal Tap*, for much of its comedy derives from the fact that we are watching what is putatively a nonfictional text – a fact which of necessity influences our understanding of the film. *Spinal Tap* makes use not only of the conventions of documentary, but of the conventions of the mock documentary, which has been around long enough to provide the film with a number of antecedents. We must consider how earlier mock documentaries may have influenced *This Is Spinal Tap*, which has itself become one of the canonical examples of this form.

The film must also be considered within the context of the several genres to which it partially belongs. The most important of these is comedy, a genre so large and complex that it subtends several others – it is, in fact, more of a *mode* than a genre. *This Is Spinal Tap* owes a great deal to comic traditions that stretch back to vaudeville (and beyond), and have long legacies in American film. Further, *Spinal Tap* is, in many important ways, a fairly conventional Hollywood musical. This is perhaps not obvious as, though the film is about a musical group and contains a great deal of original music, it does not outwardly conform to the conventions we associate with such canonical musicals as *Top Hat* (1935) or *The Band Wagon* (1953). Yet *Spinal Tap* has a great many affinities with films of the musical genre, an analysis of which sheds light onto the film. The film is, essentially, a hybrid text.

More generally, we need to consider *This Is Spinal Tap* within the context of classical Hollywood fiction filmmaking. Despite its *faux*-documentary appearance, *Spinal Tap* is a fairly classical film: it possesses intertwined 'action' and 'romance' plotlines, tight narrative causality and a three-act structure, among other storytelling tropes. In most critical writing on *This Is Spinal Tap*, the film's essential classicism has generally been ignored or downplayed in favour of discussion about its mock-documentary nature; nevertheless, *Spinal Tap*'s identity as a classical text warrants analysis of its visual and narrative systems.

The final major frame of reference within which *This Is Spinal Tap* needs to be analysed is that of the period of rock 'n' roll history between, roughly, the mid-1960s and the early 1980s. The history of heavy metal is obviously of especial importance but, in showing glimpses of the band's evolution from Merseybeat to metal, the film offers a savvy parody of several rock 'n' roll genres and subgenres. Not only this, but it is a parody of the evolution of rock 'n' roll itself:

from joyous, bluesy simplicity to overwrought, spandexed pomposity.

THE SIGHTS, THE SOUNDS, THE SMELLS OF SPINAL TAP

Reportedly, a number of audience members at preview screenings of *This Is Spinal Tap* believed the film to be a legitimate documentary. Says Reiner, 'When we previewed it in Dallas ... 85% of the audience didn't have a clue as to what we were doing ... A lot of them wondered why I had made a film about a band that nobody had heard of, and a band that was so bad.'[48] Clearly, these spectators missed the entire point of the film, but the fact that there exists the possibility for such a misreading is somewhat telling. Despite the many occasions on which the film tips its hand (notably the 'Isle of Lucy' gag), *Spinal Tap*'s mimicry of documentary is convincing enough to merit examination. The film's parody of documentary form is best understood by investigating the particular documentary style from which it borrows most heavily: *cinéma vérité*.

The *cinéma vérité* movement is a style of documentary practice which rose to prominence in Europe and the United States during the 1960s, and whose rhetorical and stylistic repercussions are still felt today. The agenda of *cinéma vérité* is apparent in its name: 'cinema truth'. Proponents of the form celebrated its alleged ability to record and represent its subjects with theretofore impossible objectivity. Stephen Mamber, in his book *Cinema Verite in America*, writes, 'The [*cinéma vérité*] filmmaker acts as an observer, attempting not to alter the situations he witnesses any more than he must by simply being there ... *Cinéma vérité* is a practical working method based upon a faith in unmanipulated reality, a refusal to tamper with life as it presents itself' (1974: 2, 4). Such claims were grounded in technological change: lightweight

16mm cameras which granted greater mobility, and portable synchronised-sound equipment which permitted 'on the fly' recordings. These advances did indeed represent a significant change to established documentary practice, which (to generalise grossly) relied on a relatively greater degree of control over the *mise-en-scène*; careful, preconceived, narrative-like structures; and, often, a 'voice of God' narrator. *Cinéma vérité* abjured such devices as voice-overs, non-diegetic music and arranged interviews, reasoning that these tactics unduly influenced viewers to arrive at particular conclusions about the contents of a given film. D. A. Pennebaker, for instance, has said: 'It's possible to go to a situation and simply film what you see there, what happens there, what goes on, and let everybody decide whether it tells them about any of these things. But you don't have to label them, you don't have to have the narration to instruct you so you can be sure and understand that it's good for you to learn' (in Levin 1971: 235). The ethos of *cinéma vérité* was that the less impact the filmmaker had on the profilmic events, the more truthfully those events would be recorded onto film. The movement aimed for a kind of cinematic neutrality.

Unfiltered objectivity is a pipe-dream, however: a filmmaker's every stylistic choice – even those made in the name of neutrality – is made by rejecting alternative means to convey the same information. No single camera angle is more 'truthful' than any other; every microphone favours some sonic frequencies over others. Moreover, the events of a *cinéma vérité* film are arranged into a certain order and form, which has a great impact on the way in which the viewer perceives them. In an essay on Frederick Wiseman's canonical *cinéma vérité* film *High School*, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson write:

> The *cinéma vérité* film records reality in some sense, but like any film, it demands that the filmmaker select and ar-

range material. The filmmaker chooses not only the film's subject matter but also the events to be photographed. The *cinéma vérité* filmmaker also makes decisions on the spur of the moment, choosing when to start filming during a scene, what to keep in frame, and what sounds to record. There is also selection in the editing phase; the eighty minutes of *High School* are culled from over forty hours of raw footage.

The filmmaker also arranges the material, presenting it in a specific way that affects our experience. Although the *cinéma vérité* filmmaker has surrendered control over what happens in front of the camera, she or he retains control over the film's structure, choosing what segment will follow another. The filmmaker can pick a camera position that will juxtapose various elements in the frame ... The filmmaker also arranges shots through editing, by putting images and sounds into specific relations. Through selection and arrangement, the *cinéma vérité* filmmaker utilises film form and style no less than does a filmmaker who employs *mise-en-scène* and stages the action for the camera. (1997: 410)

Though *This Is Spinal Tap* is not quite so specific in its critique of *cinéma vérité*, it does parody the movement in several ways.

As discussed in chapter two, *Spinal Tap*'s particular style of cinematography derives directly from that of *cinéma vérité*. Director of photography Peter Smokler used hand-held 16mm cameras to capture the improvisations of the cast – the very technique used by *cinéma vérité* cinematographers to capture 'real life'. With the exception of the concert scenes, in which the band members lip-synched and mock-played their instruments to a pre-recorded soundtrack, sound recording in *This Is Spinal Tap* was also carried out just as it is in *cinéma*

vérité: hand-held boom mics followed the unscripted action, and sonic imperfections survive into the final film.[49]

One of the targets of *This Is Spinal Tap*'s parody is the pretentiousness of filmmakers in general and *cinéma vérité* documentarians in particular, targets most effectively skewered in the film's opening scene. In this scene, Reiner, as Marty DiBergi, neatly and speedily deflates the pomposity of anyone who believes he can capture on film the genuine truth about anything, even something as mundane as a mediocre metal band. DiBergi's brief monologue conveys two key facts: that he is not particularly talented, and that he believes himself capable of making great art out of his capturing of 'the sights, the sounds, the smells of a hard-working rock band on the road'. He goes on to say, with unflinching seriousness, 'And I got that. But I got more. A lot more.' DiBergi's objectivist rhetoric recalls that of the *cinéma vérité* movement, and informs us that *cinéma vérité* will be a key frame of reference for understanding *This Is Spinal Tap*.

Interestingly, as a fiction film which makes comic use of documentary conventions, *Spinal Tap* is not altogether successful. On the level of camerawork and editing, it 'violates' documentary practice quite often, as discussed below. Further, the readily identifiable visages of Reiner, McKean, Guest and Shearer are not sufficiently obscured by their make-up or costumes. These are clearly actors who have assumed roles for a fiction film, not a documentarian's interviewees.

However, taken as a performance piece, *Spinal Tap* is a fairly convincing pseudo-documentary. The actors never break character, never knowingly wink into the lens;[50] they play their own instruments and write and sing their own songs. In all of the most important ways, these actors are, in fact, Spinal Tap. To put it another way, Spinal Tap is a real band whose members happen to be actor-musicians who have assumed performative personae. Such a practice is not qualitatively

different from, for instance, Bill Harkleroad and Jeff Cotton becoming, respectively, Zoot Horn Rollo and Antenna Jimmy Semens when they joined Captain Beefheart's Magic Band in the late 1960s: these are stage personae, nothing more. *Spinal Tap* (and Spinal Tap) shifts easily from real to fictional to a third state we might call 'semi-fictional'. This slipperiness is an important aspect of the film's humour.

Spinal Tap is not intended to be dreadful or unlistenable; the band and its music are meant to be mediocre, yet pompous. This strategy allows the film to ridicule the band while maintaining a significant degree of sympathy for its members. Similarly, Marty DiBergi himself is shown to be a bit of a buffoon, but not an unlikable or incompetent man. ('The documentary form lent itself to the exposure of the self-important', McKean has said (in Goldberg 1984: 38).) DiBergi, too, is rather mediocre at his chosen art, a fact which complicates and enriches *This Is Spinal Tap*. Taken as a documentary, the film is unexceptional; taken as a comedy, and as a parody of rockumentaries, documentaries and documentarians, it is a terrifically incisive and intelligent work. Yet this unexceptional documentary and this incisive parody are one and the same film – a rather impressive artistic feat.

SPINAL TAP, MOCKUMENTARY AND ROCKUMENTARY ... IF YOU WILL

Two types of films exert especially direct influence on *This Is Spinal Tap*: the concert film and the mock documentary. Reiner has said that, in preparing for the film, he, Shearer, McKean and Guest watched *Dont Look Back*, *The Last Waltz*, *The Kids Are Alright* (1979), *The Song Remains the Same* (1976) and 'every film that had ever been made about a band'.[51] These films generally combine concert footage (often shot with multiple cameras) and behind-the-scenes footage (gen-

erally shot with a single camera, an on-camera interviewer and an 'intimate' tone). *Spinal Tap* handles these types of scenes in precisely the same ways – stylistic choices which produce in the film a very strong audiovisual resemblance to the rockumentaries it parodies. Furthermore, films such as *Dont Look Back* and *Gimme Shelter* treat their subjects with a seriousness and reverence that borders on worship. As discussed above, *Spinal Tap* very pointedly takes on documentarians whose self-importance clouds their own vaunted objectivity. The influence of so-called rockumentaries on *This Is Spinal Tap* is plain.

The influence of pre-1984 mock documentaries on *Spinal Tap*, however, is uncertain, as the film's creators do not mention such films in interviews, and no direct references to its antecedents are obvious in *Spinal Tap*. Filmmakers have long delighted in ridiculing the documentary's purported capacity for recording the truth; *This Is Spinal Tap* is but one of the more recent and successful examples of this technique. Indeed, *Spinal Tap* itself seems to have sparked the significant resurgence in the form in the twenty-plus years since its release. Certainly, such films as Woody Allen's *Take the Money and Run* (1968) and *Zelig* (antedating *Spinal Tap* by just 10 months), Albert Brooks' *Real Life* (1979), and Peter Greenaway's *Vertical Features Remake* and *The Falls* exploit to vastly different degrees the rich comic potential of the mock documentary. Such a use of the form goes back at least as far as Luis Buñuel's brilliant, trenchant *Las Hurdes/Tierra sin pan* (*Land Without Bread*, 1933); another key early example is the BBC's 1957 April Fool's Day joke 'Swiss Spaghetti Harvest', a segment of the otherwise entirely nonfictional television programme *Panorama*.[52] Films such as *David Holzman's Diary* and *No Lies* (1974), though important and influential examples of *faux* documentaries, do not appear to have exerted any specific influence on *Spinal Tap*; moreover, these two films

in particular do not reveal their mockumentary identities until their closing credits – a tactic that *Spinal Tap* most assuredly does not use.[53]

One pre-*Tap* mock documentary merits special mention: the television film *The Rutles: All You Need Is Cash* (1978), Eric Idle and Gary Weis's parody of the Beatles and Beatlemania. Reiner, Guest, McKean and Shearer have commented that, though this film's exhaustive focus on the entire career of a single band is a markedly different approach than that taken by *This Is Spinal Tap*, *The Rutles* nevertheless set some kind of a precedent for the use of the 'mock rockumentary' format.[54] The two films are alike in several ways: the makers of both films are almost preternaturally sensitive to the musical and cultural meanings of rock music; both musical groups straddle the line between real and fictional; both films make extensive use of 'archival footage'; and neither film is particularly emphatic in playing up the documentary illusion: they both tip their hands within the first two minutes. Ultimately, though, the films' fundamental differences outweigh their somewhat more superficial similarities. Idle and Weis are not interested in parodying anything other than the Beatles and Beatlemania, whereas *Spinal Tap*'s parodic approach is broader (the film's targets include heavy metal, rock music in general, the record industry and celebrity culture, among others) and more trenchant; *The Rutles*' roots are not in *cinéma vérité* but in chirpy television documentaries, a difference which sets the two films significantly apart. Crucially, the tone of *The Rutles* is unremittingly silly and absurdist, whereas the comic attitude of *This Is Spinal Tap* is far drier and subtler. As Shearer has said: 'I think we were very self-consciously trying to make [Spinal Tap] its own band as opposed to a Rutles kind of thing, which is very visibly traceable to some other band.'[55] The films are cousins, perhaps: the one did not beget the other.

On the level of film style, most mock documentaries employ devices which are recognisable hallmarks of documentaries themselves; indeed, this is tautological. The use, in a fiction film, of techniques which possess strong associations with documentary form – most obviously, the use of the hand-held camera and a strong preference towards diegetic sound – are the very things which identify a mock documentary as such. It almost goes without saying, but a successful mock documentary is one which closely resembles an actual documentary. In itself, the mock documentary form does not possess strong stylistic or narrative hallmarks, in the way that a western or a horror film does; in other words, it has not achieved the status of genre or even subgenre. Rather, the style of a mock documentary is entirely determined by the style of the particular type(s) of documentary that it parodies.

It is curious, then – yet, as we will see, not so curious – that so many mock documentaries, including *This Is Spinal Tap*, borrow so heavily from the stylistic and narrative practice of classical fiction filmmaking. At first glance, such tactics would seem to compromise a mock documentary's efficacy, for the form of documentaries and that of fiction films would seem quite different, if not plainly opposite. In actuality, however, many documentaries – and, therefore, many mock documentaries – employ narrative structures and stylistic devices that borrow quite heavily from classical fiction filmmaking. To put it another way, *This Is Spinal Tap*'s classical narrative structure and multiple 'violations' of traditional documentary practice do not compromise its status as either a documentary or as a 'documentary', for legitimate documentaries use these devices just as thoroughly as do many classical fiction films – a topic explored in detail below. In order to understand how *This Is Spinal Tap* is something of a hybrid film, we need to study the ways in which it employs narrative and stylistic devices of both fiction and documentary films.

The rock documentary and the mock documentary are fairly narrow forms. *Spinal Tap* also belongs to two major, established genres, the comedy and the musical. An analysis of it's relationship with these genres and their respective conventions reveals a great deal about its structure and style.

THIS IS SPINAL TAP AS COMEDY/PARODY

Comedy is the most protean of all genres, and thus the most difficult to analyse. It is no small challenge to devise a list of formal, structural or narrative elements that are common to all Hollywood comedies. Film historians have split the genre into two very broad subgenres – the romantic comedy and the comedian comedy – but these, too, have many subforms; also, there are many American comedies that do not belong clearly to either group. Comedy also readily cross-pollinates with other genres: many horror films, for instance, traffic in dark comedy; light romantic comedy is an essential component of a great many musicals. What, then, is a comedy, and how do we know one when we see one? Oftentimes, the most reliable method is the simplest: the assessment of whether a given film has been intended to elicit laughter.[56] It should be clear to all but the most saturnine of spectators that the makers of *Spinal Tap* intended for viewers to laugh upon seeing their film. But, though intuitively sound, this explanation is not particularly satisfying on an academic level. Are there more rigorous ways in which we may consider *Spinal Tap* within the generic context of comedy?

Margaret Rose, in her book *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-modern* (1993), provides one way for us to study *This Is Spinal Tap* within a framework of comedy. Rose teases apart the oft-conflated terms *parody* and *satire*, both of which are, for her, by definition, essentially comic forms. In distinguishing these forms, Rose argues that a parody uses 'the pre-

formed material of its "target" as a constituent part of its own structure', whereas satire 'need not make itself dependent on [preformed material] for its own character ... but may simply make fun of a target external to itself' (1993: 81–2). By this definition, *This Is Spinal Tap*, though it surely contains elements of satire, is more appositely considered as a work of parody: it functions with two major types of preformed material: heavy metal music and *cinéma vérité* documentaries. The film also engages in *lampoon*, a term Rose uses to refer, more generally, to a form of comedy dependent on ridicule. Often, but not always, lampooning is carried out with good-natured mockery (as is the case in *Spinal Tap*); as a verb, its closest definition may be simply 'to make fun of'. Using Rose's clarifications, *Spinal Tap* can be uncomplicatedly situated within the comic mode.

But does the film adhere to some or all of the particular conventions of the *Hollywood* comedy? For a film to be essentially comic does not mean that it also abides by the customs and conventions of Hollywood comedy, an institution which has, over the last century, developed many stylistic and structural conventions of its own. However, as stated above, Hollywood comedy is highly mutable, and there are few elements common to all such films. What, if anything, do all Hollywood comedies have in common? Because comedy is capacious enough to include films as disparate as *The Navigator* (1924), *The Girl Can't Help It* (1956), *National Lampoon's Vacation* (1983) and *Freddy Got Fingered* (2001), any universal commonalities must be quite general in nature.

One candidate for such a commonality may be *the reversal or subversion of expected social behaviour.* A great many comedies make use of scenarios in which a character performs an action that deliberately undermines one or more societal mores, and horrifies the guardians of the status quo. Though the archetype is the relationship between the Marx

Brothers and their long-suffering foil, the great Margaret Dumont, this kind of behaviour appears in all manner of comedies, not just the anarchic ones (in which the whole point is to upset the social order); we can find it in all of the comedies listed above, for instance. Unexpected social behaviour may well be common to classical comedies of all kinds, but it is also the case that it has been granted special importance in Hollywood comedies.

We can also find this trope in *This Is Spinal Tap*, though its presence is not uncomplicated. Consider the now-legendary scene of the concert performance of the song 'Stonehenge', in which an 18-feet-tall replica of one of that monument's megaliths is supposed to descend from the rafters so that it may impart to the song an appropriate air of Druidic mystery. Due to a misunderstanding, however, the replica is but 18 *inches* tall, rendering the whole scene quite ludicrous, especially when two diminutive men dressed as leprechauns dance a jig around it. As David St. Hubbins puts it, Spinal Tap's pitiful reproduction of Stonehenge is, during the performance, 'in danger of being crushed by a dwarf'. The gag is one of the film's best-known and oft-cited.

Within the context of many heavy metal concerts, dire Druidic mysticism is central to the performance. Fans expect the band to adopt a tone of otherworldly, serious mystery, especially inasmuch as it is a symbol of the 'heaviness' of the music.[57] For this heaviness to be undermined so ludicrously by a miniature megalith is most certainly a subversion of the codes of expected social behaviour: this is one of the principal reasons that this moment is so funny.

But the 'Stonehenge' gag is also funny for other reasons – reasons which highlight *Spinal Tap*'s identity as a hybrid text. Most crucially, the joke is effective due to its parody of the heavy metal genre in general, and of Spinal Tap in particular: it pointedly mocks the gloom-and-doom aesthetic that is

such an indelible part of the heavy metal scene. This distinction is important because, in most Hollywood comedies, the audience is aligned with the comic figures – the characters who upset the social norms. In this scene from *Spinal Tap*, we are aligned with them, but we also enjoy the fact that they are being ridiculed – something that does not happen in, for instance, a Marx Brothers movie. The notion that the 'Stonehenge' mishap allegedly occurred during an actual performance – and that a documentarian's camera captured it on film – adds to the comic value of the scene. In this way, the scene parodies the band, their chosen musical genre and rock music in general, as well as the documentary style to which the film ostensibly belongs.

The upsetting or reversal of expected social behaviour is just one plausible candidate for a universal commonality of Hollywood comedies, and the 'Stonehenge' scene is just one example of this trope. Yet by considering *Spinal Tap* in this light, we may see how the film differs from more traditional examples of the genre. *This Is Spinal Tap* draws from classical Hollywood comedy, but it also operates in a parodic mode not commonly found in classical Hollywood comedies; it also draws from documentary practice an approach to its subjects which further enriches and complicates the humour in the film. Considering *Spinal Tap* in the context of the genre of comedy reveals another way in which the film may be seen as a hybrid. While it is unquestionably a comedy, it does not rely uncomplicatedly on the unwritten handbook for making comedies in Hollywood. *This Is Spinal Tap* is a rich comic text that refuses to be pinned down.

THIS IS SPINAL TAP AS MUSICAL

The most important and obvious way in which *This Is Spinal Tap* may be considered a musical is, simply, that it grants

privileged treatment to its many musical numbers. Footage of musical performance makes up a significant portion of the film's duration: 1,082 seconds of the film's 4,955 seconds, or 21.84 per cent of its total running time.[58] If the principal function of the film's concert footage is to familiarise viewers with the present-day music and image of Spinal Tap, the 'archival footage' of musical numbers – ostensibly taken from old television broadcasts – plays the single most important part in establishing the band's history.

Unlike the musical numbers in so-called 'integrated musicals', the songs Spinal Tap performs in concert do not advance the film's narrative; they merely serve as signposts that the band has given another concert and completed another stop on their tour. On a few occasions, important narrative events take place during the concert scenes – most notably, when Nigel storms off the stage during the performance of 'Sex Farm' in Seattle – but this is not the same thing as having the content of the songs reveal to the audience information about the characters or the story.

The songs performed in the film's numerous bits of *faux*-archival footage *do*, however, enrich our understanding of the band, its members and its place in rock history. When we see an obviously stoned Derek mouth 'We love you' during the performance of '(Listen to the) Flower People' on the (fictitious) 1967 US television show *Jamboreebop*, we instantly comprehend a great deal about where the band fits into musical and cultural history. The musical numbers in *Spinal Tap* also serve an important structural function. The songs occur at well-spaced intervals throughout the film, imparting to it a solid macrostructure within which periods of improvisational comedy and periods of musical performance alternate fairly regularly and, in so doing, establish the film's overall pace.

It is informative to consider the music-based superstructure of *Spinal Tap* alongside that of a canonical Hollywood musi-

Musical number	Duration	% of total running time	Placement in film	
			running time	% of total duration[59]
1. 'Bless Your Beautiful Hide'	149 sec.	2.43%	4:14 – 6:43	4.15% – 6.58%
2. 'Wonderful Wonderful Day'	145 sec.	2.37%	14:07 – 16:32	13.83% – 15.79%
3. 'When You're in Love'	95 sec.	1.55%	26:31 – 28:06	25.98% – 27.53%
4. 'Goin' Co'tin'	212 sec.	3.46%	35:21 – 38:52	34.63% – 38.08%
5. 'Barn Dance'	390 sec.	6.37%	41:07 – 47:37	40.28% – 46.65%
6. 'When You're in Love'	106 sec.	1.73%	55:28 – 57:14	54.34% – 56.07%
7. 'Lament (Lonesome Polecat)'	197 sec.	3.22%	57:59 – 61:16	56.81% – 60.03%
8. 'Sobbin' Women'	169 sec.	2.76%	63:56 – 66:45	62.64% – 65.40%
9. 'June Bride'	177 sec.	2.89%	83:17 – 86:13	81.60% – 84.47%
10. 'Spring, Spring, Spring'	114 sec.	1.86%	87:58 – 89:52	86.19% – 88.05%

- Total running time: 6,124 seconds
- Total running time of musical numbers: 1,754 seconds
- Musical numbers as a percentage of the film's total duration: 28.64%
- Average duration of musical numbers: 175.4 sec. (2.86% of total duration)

Table 4.1: Song placement in *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers...*

cal. To take an example from that canon, Stanley Donen's *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954) offers an interesting structural comparison with *This Is Spinal Tap*. Tables 4.1 and 4.2 consider the durations and placements of these two films' musical numbers.

Clearly, there are some major differences between the two films' structures. For one, the duration of the average *Spinal Tap* musical number is approximately half that of the average number from *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*; for another, in *Spinal Tap*, each musical number, on average, takes up a

Musical number	Duration	% of total running time	Placement in film	
			running time	% of total duration
1. 'Tonight I'm Gonna Rock You Tonight'	81 sec.	1.63%	2:47 – 4:08	2.97% – 5.01%
2. 'Gimme Some Money'	33 sec.	0.67%	4:50 – 5:23	5.85% – 6.52%
3. 'Big Bottom'	120 sec.	2.42%	10:02 – 12:02	12.15% – 14.57%
4. 'Hellhole'	77 sec.	1.55%	20:24 – 21:41	24.70% – 26.26%
5. '(Listen to the) Flower People'	52 sec.	1.05%	31:38 – 32:30	38.20% – 39.35%
6. 'Rock 'n' Roll Creation'	161 sec.	3.25%	36:22 – 39:03	44.04% – 47.29%
7. 'Heavy Duty'	82 sec.	1.65%	43:56 – 45:18	53.20% – 54.85%
8. Nigel's guitar solo	45 sec.	0.91%	53:00 – 53:45	64.18% – 65.09%
9. 'Stonehenge'	167 sec.	3.37%	54:43 – 57:30	66.26% – 69.63%
10. 'Sex Farm'	75 sec.	1.51%	65:57 – 67:12	79.86% – 81.37%
11. 'Jazz Odyssey'	41 sec.	0.83%	69:30 – 70:11	84.16% – 84.98%
12. 'Tonight I'm Gonna Rock You Tonight'	148 sec.	2.99%	74:47 – 77:25	90.76% – 93.74%

- Total running time: 4,955 seconds
- Total running time of musical numbers: 1,082 seconds
- Musical numbers as a percentage of the film's total duration: 21.84%
- Average duration of musical numbers: 90.17 sec. (1.82% of total duration)

Table 4.2: ... and *This Is Spinal Tap*

smaller percentage of the film's overall running time than does the average number in *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*: the full percentage point between these figures (1.82 per cent vs. 2.86 per cent) is fairly significant.

But the similarities between the two films are extremely interesting. First, we can see that both films reprise just a single musical number: 'When You're in Love' in *Seven*

Brides, and 'Tonight I'm Gonna Rock You Tonight' in *Spinal Tap*. In both films, the narrative function of the repeated song changes in its second iteration. In the first performance of 'When You're in Love', Milly (Jane Powell) explains to a clueless Adam (Howard Keel) that a marriage is about love, caring and respect. But it is Adam himself who performs the song for the second time, singing it to his younger brother Gideon (Russ Tamblyn) as part of a heart-to-heart talk. The second performance, then, indicates a crucial narrative shift: that Adam has come around to Milly's way of thinking about love.[60] In *Spinal Tap*, the first concert performance of 'Tonight I'm Gonna Rock You Tonight' occurs in the film's second scene, and is our introduction to the band and their music. This number is clearly meant to show that the band are at the top of their game and is beloved by their fans. The second time the band performs the song it is, initially, as a swansong: 'Tonight I'm Gonna Rock You Tonight' is the opening number in what is to be Spinal Tap's final concert. But when Nigel rejoins the band midway through the song, it becomes, once again, an anthem of Spinal Tap's unity and popularity. In both films, the repeated song is used as a vehicle for important narrative developments.

Even more interesting is the fact that the placements of the musical numbers in both films is fairly similar (see Tables 4.3 and 4.4). Though the figures do not match up exactly, of course, they are close enough to suggest some kind of structural affinity between *This Is Spinal Tap* and the canonical musical. *Seven Brides* has ten musical numbers and *Spinal Tap* has a dozen. Both films' first musical numbers begin before the five per cent mark; neither film ends with a musical number, nor positions a musical number around its precise halfway point. Both films have clusters of five musical numbers (including the longest one in each film) within the 35 per cent to seventy per cent span – approximately the films' middle

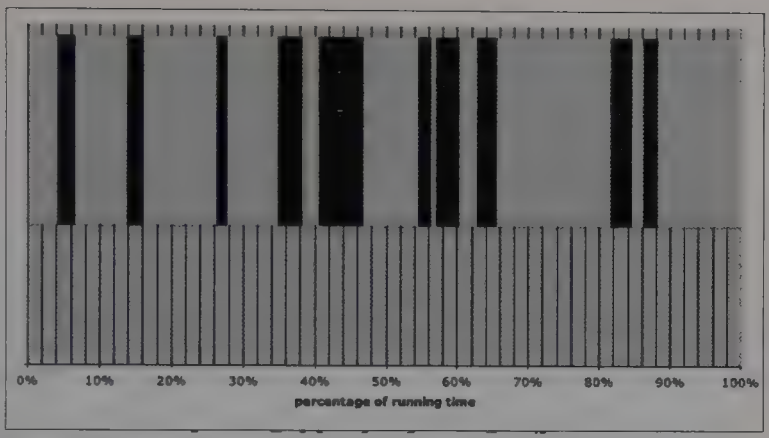


Table 4.3: *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*

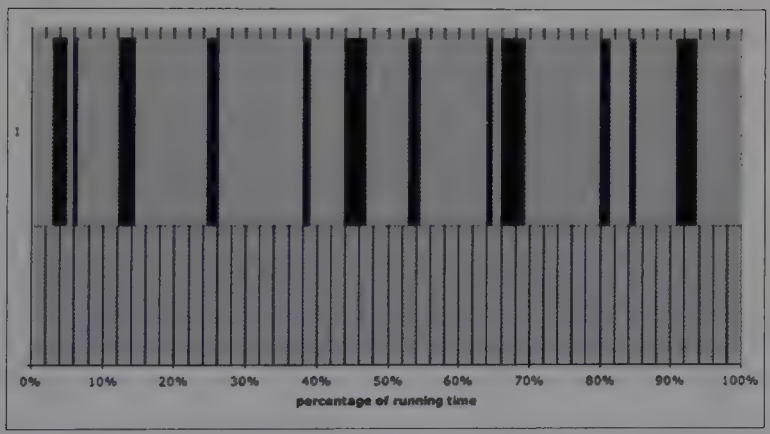


Table 4.4: *This Is Spinal Tap*

thirds. The numbers are more evenly spaced in *Spinal Tap* than in *Seven Brides*, but there are similar non-musical gaps (in terms of percentage) between numbers in both films: the gap between 'Wonderful, Wonderful Day' and 'When You're in Love' corresponds roughly to that between 'Big Bottom' and 'Hellhole'; the gap between 'Sobbin' Women' and 'June Bride' corresponds roughly to that between 'Stonehenge' and 'Sex Farm'. In sum, though a point-by-point comparison can-

not and should not be forced, there are a number of important and revealing structural similarities between these two films.

Of course, if we really wished to make a case for *Spinal Tap* as a musical, it is not sufficient merely to compare it with a single film; *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* was selected for its incontrovertible place in the musical canon, but it is not representative of all Hollywood musicals. Is *This Is Spinal Tap*, on the basis of this comparison, a clear-cut example of the Hollywood musical? No, certainly not: its formal and structural borrowings from several other film genres and modes render it a rather impure example of any single one of them. But the points of similarity detailed above are compelling enough to suggest that the musical genre does exert a certain influence on the form of *This Is Spinal Tap*.

Finally, it is essential to note that the narrative and structural functions of the film's musical numbers are important, but not as important as their role in its humour. This subject is covered in detail below; for now, suffice it to say that the musical numbers in *Spinal Tap* are funny for two main reasons: the opportunities they provide for parody, and their lyrical content. Some of the film's most original and enduring humour is to be found in the lyrics of its songs – indeed, that the songs in *Spinal Tap* are so funny is one of the most important reasons for the ardour of the film's following.

SPINAL TAP AND NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

The overarching narrative of *This Is Spinal Tap* is structured by the band's tour of America in support of their latest Polymer Records album, *Smell the Glove*. This tour takes them, over the course of several weeks, from New York City to Los Angeles, via Memphis, Cleveland, Seattle and several other cities. Spinal Tap's journey provides, in several ways, a framework for the film. First, it affords many opportunities to see

them perform – scenes which are not only extremely funny, but which convey a great deal of character information. Also, the tour is part of the pretext for the film's central narrative conflict between David and Nigel: tensions are exacerbated by the arduousness of rock 'n' roll travel. *Spinal Tap* is, in a way, a road movie. More basically, the tour structure comes with a built-in beginning and end, and with a generalised goal: for the band to re-energise its dwindling fan base.[61]

The film's other principal formatting device is a version of the three-act structure, a method of plotting which goes back at least as far as Aristotle's *Poetics*, written *circa* 350 BC. Classically, the three acts in this form are *setup*, *complication* and *resolution*, generally followed by a brief epilogue or *dénouement*. *Spinal Tap*'s adherence to this structure, which has a long history in Hollywood fiction filmmaking, is fairly strong, if slightly disproportionate.[62] In the first act (including DiBergi's brief introduction), we learn about the band, its members and its history. In the second act, we learn of the two major conflicts: a waning popular interest in Spinal Tap's music, and the threat to the band's unity posed by Jeanine, David's girlfriend, who joins the tour in Milwaukee and soon replaces Ian Faith (Tony Hendra) as Spinal Tap's manager. These two conflicts result in tension between David and Nigel, and come to a head when Nigel quits the band. In the brief third act, Ian is reinstated as manager, and Nigel rejoins the group. The film's *dénouement* occurs at a concert in Tokyo: Spinal Tap's song 'Sex Farm' has charted in Japan, giving the band an opportunity for a fresh start.

Though we get hints about Spinal Tap's declining popularity by the film's 13th minute (when Ian informs them that the Boston gig has been cancelled), the first act may be said to last from the film's first moments to about its 24th minute. (The film is 82 minutes long.) At this point, the band members learn that their Memphis concert has been cancelled.

Further, this is when they learn that Jeanine will soon join the tour – a key narrative turning point and a piece of information which leaves Nigel looking decidedly nonplussed. In the same scene, a critical blow is struck to the band's pride when a radio announcer refers to their residence in the 'Where Are They Now?' file.[63] That these three events occur within a five-minute span indicates the definitive commencement of the 'complication' part of the three-act structure.

The second act is the film's longest: it lasts from the film's 30th minute to its 67th, when Nigel quits the band. It is within the course of this act that the complications become more intense and severe: the members of Spinal Tap endure all manner of on-stage mishaps, promotional events attended by no one and Jeanine's disastrously wrong-headed managerial decisions.

The third act encompasses the time between Nigel's departing and rejoining the band: from the 67th minute to about its 75th. During this time, the depths to which the band sinks are fairly dire: they are billed on a marquee below a puppet show and embark on a hilariously accurate 'new direction' of pretentious, progressive jazz-rock. (See, for instance, certain albums by Jeff Beck and Uriah Heep.) After these humiliations, the band resigns themselves, not entirely contentedly, to the end of Spinal Tap as they know it. The 'Smell the Glove' tour becomes a farewell tour.

The film's next three minutes are packed: we see Nigel rejoin the band, a portion of the Tokyo concert, the reinstatement of Ian and the death-by-explosion of drummer Mick Shrimpton. (Reiner himself has remarked that the story is 'kind of bottom-heavy', in that most narrative changes take place within the last twenty minutes of the film.)[64] The film's final five minutes are composed of excerpts from DiBergi's interviews with the members of the band, which run under the closing credits.

As mentioned above, *This Is Spinal Tap* is a hybrid work. As a classical comedy, it adheres fairly well to the three-act structure and romance/action plotting common to Hollywood narration. However, since it is also a mock documentary, its reliance on other key hallmarks of Hollywood narration is minimal. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson have enumerated several other components of classical narration, all of which Spinal Tap eschews: a cause-and-effect structure, the use of deadlines and appointments, the use of principal characters as strong causal agents and the primacy of characters' goals and desires (2004: 89–91).

Of the various devices of classical narration which the film dilutes or rejects, the most important is that of the chain of cause-and-effect. In *Spinal Tap*, one narrative event is not necessarily the root cause of another, and so on, in domino-like fashion. Rather, the film often unfolds like a series of vignettes which are hung upon the skeleton of the three-act/journey structure. As a result of the weakening of this cause-and-effect chain, the narrative of *This Is Spinal Tap* relies very little on the use of deadlines and appointments which so often guide characters' actions in classical Hollywood film. Though the band's travels across America are presumably dictated by a predetermined concert schedule, no temporal urgency of any kind is relevant to the progression of the narrative.

The members of Spinal Tap are not particularly strong causal agents, to use Bordwell and Thompson's phrase: events happen *to* them more often than are actions taken *by* them. Neither do *Spinal Tap*'s protagonists have especially well-defined goals or desires, other than to have a successful tour. The film never explicitly posits the 'Smell the Glove' tour as a make-or-break situation for the band; there is none of the urgency which generally drives a classical narrative. *Spinal Tap* eschews or weakens these narrative devices in the name of simulating reality more accurately, since real life is not always

guided by tight causal chains and goal-oriented protagonists. Here, then, is one of its strongest resemblances to the films of the *cinéma vérité* movement, which is concerned with representing events as they actually happen, not with fitting them into a preconceived narrative structure.

Yet it is more complicated than this, for, as it turns out, many *cinéma vérité* films – and many documentaries in general – rely fairly heavily on conventional tools of narrative structure. To take one example, *Gimme Shelter*, like many fiction films, coalesces around a central narrative conflict: the murder at the Altamont Speedway. Another canonical *cinéma vérité* film, *Primary* (1960), has a built-in narrative arc: that of the 1960 Democratic primary race in the state of Wisconsin.

Spinal Tap is far from the only mock documentary to have picked up on the fact that legitimate documentaries commonly possess stories, and that they often employ some – but not all – of the structuring devices of classical narration: when mock documentaries eschew certain narrative devices, it is generally in the name of making their subject matter seem more 'real' and unrehearsed. Mock documentaries as diverse as *David Holzman's Diary*, *Zelig*, *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980), *Bob Roberts* (1992), *Man Bites Dog* (1992), *Drop Dead Gorgeous* (1999) and Christopher Guest's *Waiting for Guffman* (1996), *Best in Show* (2000) and *A Mighty Wind* (2003), employ, to varying degrees, the three-act structure, character-centred conflict, goal-oriented protagonists, chains of cause and effect and various other devices. In each of these films, narrative techniques lend structure and direction to films which might otherwise play like assemblages of isolated vignettes. The formlessness of alleged actuality is rendered more cinematically palatable by the use of mechanisms of narrative. Somewhat ironically, then, the very fact that these and other mock documentaries employ narrative devices increases the degree of their kinship with actual documentaries.

To understand more fully the ways in which *Spinal Tap* relies on techniques of fictional narrative, a comparison between it and *Spinal Tap: The Last Tour*, the 20-minute demo reel which secured the feature's funding, is instructive. Two things are most striking. As discussed in chapter two, many of *Spinal Tap*'s gags and situations come directly from *The Last Tour*, often nearly verbatim. More interesting is the fact that *The Last Tour* has no story to speak of: this short film is a collection of humorous sketches and concert performances, but its narrative is negligible, or even absent. Though, for instance, the tension between Nigel and David is present in the short film, it is used as little more than a punchline: at one point, the film cuts directly from David saying that he couldn't live without the other members of Spinal Tap to a scene of a vitriolic intraband argument in a recording studio.[65] The conflict between the band members is not used as a structuring device, as it is in *This Is Spinal Tap*.

Tellingly, there is no Jeanine in *Spinal Tap: The Last Tour*. This important character was added to *This Is Spinal Tap* at the recommendation of Norman Lear, as a condition of his Embassy Pictures financing the film.[66] Lear's renowned storytelling skills proved themselves once again: Jeanine's function is to precipitate and exacerbate the divide between David and Nigel, and thereby impart to the film its central conflict. Referring to the process by which the film's creators extracted an 82-minute film from over seven hours of footage, Reiner has said: 'We knew that Jeanine coming between the two guys was really the only story we had, so whatever scenes fuelled that aspect of the film, we had to keep.'[67] The complication of the 'action' storyline with a 'romance' storyline is a very common device in Hollywood cinema, and its presence in *This Is Spinal Tap* strengthens its connection with classical narration. Its absence from *Spinal Tap: The Last Tour* speaks to that film's relatively lesser degree of narrative coherence.

Just as Spinal Tap occupies a liminal space between real and fictional, *Spinal Tap* draws fairly heavily on conventions of both fiction *and* nonfiction filmmaking. In this way, the film's form and content mesh admirably well.

THE STYLE OF *THIS IS SPINAL TAP*

In addition to the several ways in which *This Is Spinal Tap* may usefully be understood as a hybrid film, we may add another consideration: that of film style. As a fiction film masquerading as a documentary, the film employs stylistic devices from both forms. This blending of styles shows through most clearly in scenes which appear to violate documentary convention.

The film's cinematographical borrowings from *cinéma vérité* practice – extemporaneous camerawork – have been enumerated above, and are plain enough. *Spinal Tap*'s *cinéma vérité*-style extemporaneous sound recording, too, has been addressed above, but it should be mentioned that, in at least one key way, the method of sound recording in *This Is Spinal Tap* differs – at least in principle – from that of *cinéma vérité*. The sound recording in the scenes of Spinal Tap in concert, unlike that in the rest of the scenes in the film, was not accomplished extemporaneously. In these scenes, as mentioned above, the actors lip-synched and mock-played their instruments along with recordings of themselves performing the songs. As the film's concert scenes were shot with multiple cameras and required multiple takes, on-the-fly audio recording became prohibitively challenging, though the filmmakers did wish to make live recordings of the concerts.[68] *Cinéma vérité* concert films, such as *Gimme Shelter* and *Dont Look Back*, make a point of capturing – imperfectly, if need be – their performers' songs as they are being played live, for 'liveness' was of the utmost importance to the *cinéma vérité*

ethos. *Dont Look Back*, for instance, includes a scene of Bob Dylan forging ahead with a song despite his microphone's failure. Director D. A. Pennebaker's rationale for including this scene was, almost certainly, that such imperfections were seen as a testament to his film's authenticity.

Of the many other elements of the film's style, the most interesting to the analyst is editing. Many scenes in *This Is Spinal Tap* are edited in such a way as to shatter any illusion that the film is a documentary – and yet the breaking of this illusion is not especially important to the film's cohesiveness, or to its comic style.

One extremely common editing convention in Hollywood narrative filmmaking is that of shot/reverse-shot. This device, like the other techniques of the Hollywood continuity editing system, is designed to preserve spatio-temporal unity within a scene. It is a simple technique: in the *shot*, we see a character looking at (and often speaking to) a second character; in the *reverse-shot*, we see the second character looking back at the first. The back-and-forth cutting between these shots is guided by the actors' gazes, which are used to define the parameters of the physical space in which the action occurs. A conversation shown in shot/reverse-shot is understood to be unfolding in real, uninterrupted time.

The act of cutting from one shot to another, by definition, interrupts the temporal and spatial flow of a scene; the rationale behind shot/reverse-shot editing (and continuity editing in general) is that it minimises a cut's rupturing of space and time – arguably to the point of eradicating it. When editing is described as 'seamless' or 'invisible', it is the continuity editing system which is being invoked. Because the purpose of shot/reverse-shot is to preserve spatio-temporal unity, and because it has been used so thoroughly and for so many years in Hollywood cinema, it has become inextricably linked with fiction-film narration. As such, it may be seen as anath-

ematic to certain schools of documentary practice, such as *cinéma vérité*, which place an exalted value on the unaltered – or minimally altered – presentation of events.[69]

Spinal Tap abounds with examples of shot/reverse-shot editing, a fact which, in itself, would not actually compromise its putative identity as a documentary, for it is not a 'violation' of documentary practice to use multiple cameras. By editing together footage taken by more than one camera, a filmmaker can use the shot/reverse-shot system without doing any violence whatsoever to spatio-temporal unity. (Martin Scorsese, for instance, used, for this very reason, several cameras to shoot *The Last Waltz*. Neither is it uncommon for directors of fiction films to use multiple cameras to achieve the same ends: Akira Kurosawa, for one, did so quite frequently.) However, as we will see, certain of the shot/reverse-shot scenes in *This Is Spinal Tap* do, in fact, violate the spatial and temporal unity which is so important to the *cinéma vérité* aesthetic.

Spinal Tap's editing compromises spatial and temporal unity in other ways, as well. Reiner himself, in his DVD commentary, calls attention to one such violation, which occurs approximately 36 minutes into the film. Spinal Tap's manager, Ian, has just arrived at a soundcheck in Milwaukee with a box full of brand-new copies of the band's album, *Smell the Glove*. In Figure 4.5, Nigel is at screen right and Ian is at screen left, with Viv (David Kaff) off-screen behind Nigel. Figure 4.6, the next shot in this sequence, is a reverse-shot of David and Jeanine. In Figure 4.7, when we cut back to Ian and Nigel, they have unaccountably switched places, and Viv has moved into a position of prominence.

The interesting thing about this brief series of shots is that it is edited 'incorrectly' according to the tenets of *both* the continuity system and *cinéma vérité* practice. The cut from Shot 2 to Shot 3 violates continuity principles in that Nigel and Ian have switched places, and that Viv's position has changed

Figure 4.5, 4.6 and 4.7: Spatial and temporal continuity confusions

significantly. It is immaterial that the duration of Shot 2 (about 3.5 seconds) is sufficient time for the three men to move a few steps – the very aim of the continuity system is to render space and time as unified and non-confusing as possible. Were it important that Nigel and Ian change positions, a filmmaker abiding by the rules of continuity would have included a separate shot in which we can see them changing positions – otherwise, the possibility exists for viewers to become confused about the space.

If this scene were shot according to the strict tenets of *cinéma vérité* the very existence of the cuts would be, to some degree, problematic, in part because of an editing technique called a *sound bridge*. In a sound bridge, the soundtrack from Shot A continues on for a short time after the image track has cut to Shot B. The effect is to smooth out the transition from Shot A to Shot B by emphasising the fact that the time represented by the shots is continuous. In this particular scene, the sound actually bridges all three shots. As Shot 1 ends, Ian is talking, and his dialogue continues uninterrupted into Shot 2. In Shot 2, neither David nor Jeanine speak: first, we hear the continuation of Ian's dialogue and then Nigel commences speaking from off-screen. Nigel's dialogue then bridges the gap between the Shots 2 and 3.

What has happened here is that the film's editors have used a sound bridge and the cutaway to Jeanine and David to conceal the fact that Hendra's line reading was deemed optimal in, perhaps, the first take of the scene, and Guest's reading was deemed optimal in, perhaps, the third. In deciding to use separate portions of two different takes, the editors faced a problem: they could not cut directly from Ian in take one to Nigel in take three, because, as it happens, their positions are reversed in these takes. If such a cut had been made, Nigel would appear to magically teleport from one side of the screen to another: a blatant jump cut which would compro-

mise the unity – and comedy – of the scene. In order to get around this problem, the editors first inserted the cutaway shot of Jeanine and David while continuing Hendra's reading from take one. Then, during this cutaway (whose original audio is not used at all), the editors faded out Hendra's take one reading and faded up Guest's take three reading. Now, obligated to continue with the audio from take three, they cut to Shot 3. The fact that Hendra and Guest have switched places is a far less noticeable error than would be the 'instantaneous teleportation' error described above. On his DVD commentary track, *Spinal Tap* editor Robert Leighton says:

> Most of the times, the way we edited this film ... was by being able to edit dialogue together. We'd make the sound cut first, and then we'd synch up the picture and choose where to cross over from one image to another. You had to make these bold cuts between images. It was really editing in terms of story editing. It wasn't anything to do with visual flow, although we tried to do that.[70]

Later, referring to the scene in the Memphis hotel lobby, which features similar continuity errors, Leighton adds:

> The scene in the hotel lobby here is one of the scenes where, I think if you look at it, you'll find that people stand in different formations. We just cut the stuff together, and, really, we went so precisely for the lines that hopefully you were just following *that*, and it carried you through ... If you're seeing the things you want to see, then you're not looking at the knife in the hand or the handkerchief in the pocket.[71]

The editing of both the hotel lobby scene and the scene described above bears out Leighton's words. When Reiner, in

his DVD commentary, calls attention to this editing error, he is not referring to the film's infringement of *cinéma vérité* principles. He is speaking of the scene's violations of the principles of continuity editing. This remark is quite revealing, as it indicates that, to its filmmakers, *This Is Spinal Tap* is, first and foremost, a comedy, not a mock documentary.

It should be clear how this method of editing violates the spatio-temporal unity on which the continuity system is based. The scene also transgresses tenets of *cinéma vérité* for some of the same reasons: it artificially reconstructs space and reorders time so that the scene does not represent actuality, but a creative reinterpretation of reality.

That the same stylistic fillip contradicts both the continuity system and the *cinéma vérité* ethos should alert us that perhaps these styles are not so dissimilar, after all. And this is in fact the case: *cinéma vérité* does borrow fairly heavily from the continuity system. Bordwell and Thompson, in their article on Wiseman's *High School*, point out several such borrowings, including the use of sound bridges.

> Cutting from speaker to listener ... lets Wiseman skip over action and conceal the breaks through off-screen sound. If he cuts away from the teacher to a reaction shot of the pupil listening but keeps the teacher's voice on the sound track, he can omit whole sentences before cutting back to the speaker. (1997: 413)

That *This Is Spinal Tap* uses some of the same Hollywood conventions used in *cinéma vérité* films enhances – in a weird, backhanded way – its kinship with the films of that movement. That is, not only does *Spinal Tap* parody *cinéma vérité*'s putatively privileged ability to make truth claims, but it also replicates some of the 'errors' which compromise those truth claims. It is extremely unlikely that the makers of *Spinal*

Tap intended for their film's imperfections to serve this comic function, for parody of such surpassing subtlety is a rare bird indeed. But it is curious to note that both the parody and the object of parody can and do evince the same kinds of so-called mistakes.

If the film is funny enough to engage its audience, then the audience will not notice or care about any incidental mistakes. That these mistakes are all but unnoticeable – even to a long-time member of the *Spinal Tap* cult – should be testament enough to the film's success as a comic text. To seek out these errors is to miss the point entirely. *Spinal Tap* is a comedy which uses documentary as one of its several launching pads: many of its jokes are funny precisely because they are not jokes at all, but, putatively, actual events in the actual existence of an actual band. It is for this reason that *This Is Spinal Tap*'s stylistic relationship with both continuity editing and documentary practice merits exploration.

SPINAL TAP AND ROCK HISTORY

So far, this chapter has considered *This Is Spinal Tap* in the context of cinematic genre/mode, narrative and style. But it is just as important to situate the film within the context of British and American rock music – not just heavy metal – made between the mid-1960s and the early 1980s. *This Is Spinal Tap* is a pinpoint parody of the sundry and oft-ridiculous metamorphoses that rock music has undergone during this span. Such a parody could only have been made by filmmakers who not only know this music intimately, but love it deeply.

Though the focus of *This Is Spinal Tap* is their 1982 'Smell the Glove' tour, the film also spends a significant amount of time (about six minutes) delving into Spinal Tap's history: we see footage of and hear stories about the band's music and

former band members.[72] This 'past and present' format provides many more opportunities for musical parody than would a straight concert film; just as importantly, it increases *Spinal Tap*'s resemblance to many of the rockumentaries which are one of the principal subjects of its parody. (Reiner has, for instance, repeatedly cited *The Last Waltz*, which is filled with interviews and reminiscences, as a major influence on *Spinal Tap*.) By treating Spinal Tap's past with (mock) reverence, the filmmakers lampoon the hagiographical inclinations of rockumentary directors.

At the time he made his own rockumentary, Spinal Tap had been together, according to Marty DiBergi, for 17 years and 15 albums, which dates the band back to about 1965. During this time, the band underwent many changes in musical style (and even more drummers). By tracing chronologically the band's various incarnations, *Spinal Tap*'s approach to parodying rock music becomes clear.[73]

Both David St. Hubbins and Nigel Tufnel grew up in East London's Squatney district, where they lived in adjacent flats. As boys, in 1961, they composed their first song, 'All the Way Home'. As members of Spinal Tap, they perform an *a capella* version of this song at DiBergi's request during an interview. Though we never hear the original version of 'All the Way Home', David's and Nigel's rendition of it for DiBergi's camera makes it clear that, like many other young, aspiring British musicians in the early 1960s, David and Nigel were heavily influenced by country-tinged rhythm-and-blues of the type popularised by Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly and Eddie Cochran. The similarities between the prehistory of Spinal Tap and that of the Beatles, who were also heavily influenced by such music, are impossible to overlook, and are surely not accidental. As the Beatles' early history is well known to even casual rock fans, *Spinal Tap*, by invoking Beatles history, situates itself within a familiar musical context.

'All the Way Home' also merits mention for being the only non-comic song performed by the band members in the entire film. The song's lyrics (I'm standing out beside the railroad track/And I'm waiting for that train to bring you back/If she's not on the 5:19/Then I'm gonna know what sorrow means/And I'm gonna cry cry cry all the way home[74]) are entirely authentic for music of that type and time period, and would not have been out of place on an Eddie Cochran record. The song's simplicity and innocence are in stark contrast to the *oeuvre* of Spinal Tap.

Both David and Nigel went on to join skiffle bands: David joined the Creatures and Nigel became a member of the Lovely Lads. Skiffle – a form of folk music with strong blues and jazz influences, and which commonly employed such instruments as washboard and 'tea-chest bass' – was popular in Britain in the late 1950s and early 1960s, due largely to the success of the King of Skiffle, Lonnie Donegan. The most famous of all skiffle bands was, of course, the Quarrymen. Founded in 1957 by a young John Lennon, the Quarrymen would, by 1960, become the Beatles. In drawing this further comparison between Spinal Tap and the Beatles, *This Is Spinal Tap* elevates its subject to 'legend' status, a trenchant joke about the band's essential mediocrity, and about documentarians who take their subject matter too seriously.

David and Nigel left their respective bands to form a group called the Originals, which became the New Originals when another London band claimed to be the original Originals (though that band soon changed its name to the Regulars). Upon the 1964 demise of the New Originals, David and Nigel, along with bassist Ronnie Pudding and drummer John 'Stumpy' Pepys, started a Merseybeat group called the Thamesmen. Their first single was 'Gimme Some Money' b/w 'Cups and Cakes', both of which songs appear in *This Is Spinal Tap*.

The two parts of the word 'Merseybeat' refer, respectively, to the River Mersey, which runs through Liverpool, the epicentre of this musical style and the home of bands such as the Beatles, Gerry and the Pacemakers and the Searchers, and the backbeat which provided the form's rhythmic signature. More aggressive than skiffle, Merseybeat's syncopated backbeat (in which both the drums and bass accentuate the second and fourth beats of a bar) makes it the first true rock subgenre to which both the Beatles and Spinal Tap belong. The Merseybeat sound was, for many British bands of the time, the next logical step in their musical evolutions from skiffle to rock.

The scene in which we see archival footage from a British television show of 1965 of the Thamesmen perform 'Gimme Some Money' is, for several reasons, one of the film's comic highlights. (It is also one of only two scenes to survive intact from the earlier 20-minute demo *Spinal Tap: The Last Tour*.) Though this is the first such footage in the film, it comes right after we meet the modern-day incarnation of Spinal Tap, so that it offers a strong comic contrast between Spinal Tap and the Thamesmen. Not only are these bands utterly different, but the evolution of the one into the other is, arguably, more akin to devolution.

The lyrics of 'Gimme Some Money' seem to have been designed as a parodic response to the bluenoses whose complaints about rock's immorality were especially pronounced in the 1950s and 1960s. The song's only peer, with regard to its naked rejection of love for cash (for example, 'Stop wastin' my time/You know what I want/...I'm looking for pound notes, loose change, bad cheques, anything'), is the melodically perfect but monumentally callous 'First I Look at the Purse', which Smokey Robinson wrote for the Contours ... in 1965. Or, perhaps even more pertinently, the Beatles' 1963 cover of 'Money (That's What I Want)'.

Finally, the performance of 'Gimme Some Money' affords *Spinal Tap*'s filmmakers the opportunity to parody the state of television in the mid-1960s. Television networks in the US and the UK devoted a fair amount of programming time to the burgeoning (and potentially profitable) rock 'n' roll phenomenon. Programmes featuring pop bands performing their latest hits sprang up on both sides of the Atlantic: *Shindig* (1964–66) and *Hullaballoo* (1965–66) in the US, *Ready Steady Go!* (1963–66) and *Top of the Pops* (1964–2006) in the UK. Moreover, the popular variety shows of the day began to alter their programming to cater to the tastes of the rapidly growing youth culture. The best-known instance of this phenomenon were the Beatles' four appearances on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in February 1964 and September 1965. The *Pop, Look & Listen* set cleverly captures these shows' low-budget attempts at appealing to teens (for instance, the half-hearted 'musical staff' background in Figure 4.8), the relentlessly frontal frame compositions on which these shows relied (compare the Thamesmen in Figure 4.8 to the Beatles on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in Figure 4.9), and the shows' requisite lip-synching and mock-strumming: the Thamesmen's electric instruments are not even plugged in. In replicating the aesthetics of mid-1960s pop music and of rock-themed TV shows, this scene demonstrates *This Is Spinal Tap*'s remarkable sensitivity to the popular culture of the time – and to mainstream culture's attempts to cash in on it.

The next major step in the evolution of Spinal Tap occurred in 1967. In the period following their appearance on *Pop, Look & Listen*, the freshly-scrubbed (if lyrically abrupt) Thamesmen metamorphosed into Spinal Tap's earliest, most acid-soaked incarnation. It is in this form that we see a scene of them performing the gentle, trippy, folk-psychedelic song '(Listen to the) Flower People' on the US television show *Jamboreebop* in 1967 (Figure 4.10).[75]

Figure 4.8: The Thamesmen perform 'Gimme Some Money' on *Pop, Look & Listen*, 1965

Figure 4.9: The Beatles perform on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, 1964

The *Jamboreebop* scene parodies the rapidity (and vapidity) with which a great many rock bands adopted the then-fashionable psychedelic aesthetic. The suggestion is that Spinal Tap is not only mediocre but opportunistic, ready to jump on any potentially lucrative musical bandwagon (with the im-

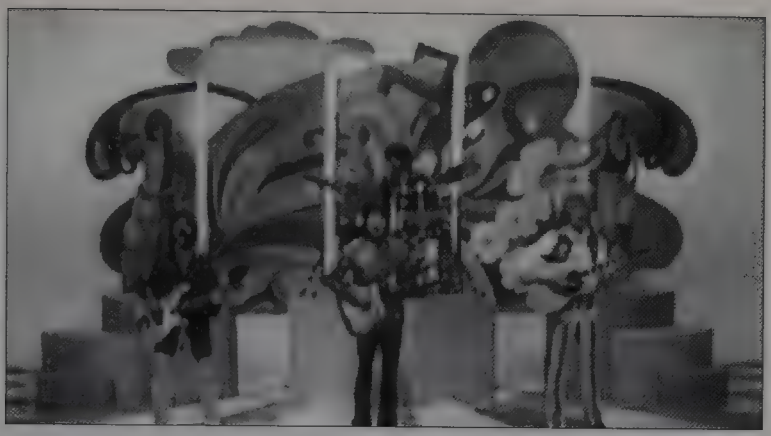


Figure 4.10: Spinal Tap perform '(Listen to the) Flower People' on *Jamboreebop*, 1967

plication that heavy metal has been particularly remunerative for them). In one of the many later interviews in which *Spinal Tap*'s actors speak in character, Guest, as Tufnel, said of this period in the band's history: 'We tried to jump on the bandwagon. There was such an enormous sort of public clamouring for that sort of *garbage*, frankly, we thought we might as well reap some of the benefits. So we dished that one ['(Listen to the) Flower People'] out, and it really did well for us, actually' (Del Ray 1984: 43).

Jamboreebop itself gets off no easier: like *Pop, Look & Listen*, it is a symbol of the crude commercial co-opting of a cultural movement whose intentions, at one point, were genuine. The *Jamboreebop* set is more colourful but no less cheap than that of *Pop, Look & Listen*, and the instruments are *still* not plugged in. Particularly accurate – and, therefore, hilarious – are the inelastic go-go dancers, the 'kaleidoscope' lens effect seen in Figure 4.11 and the double-necked guitar which Nigel somehow gets to sound like a sitar, the 'exotic' Indian instrument which found favour with trendsetters such as Brian Jones and George Harrison.

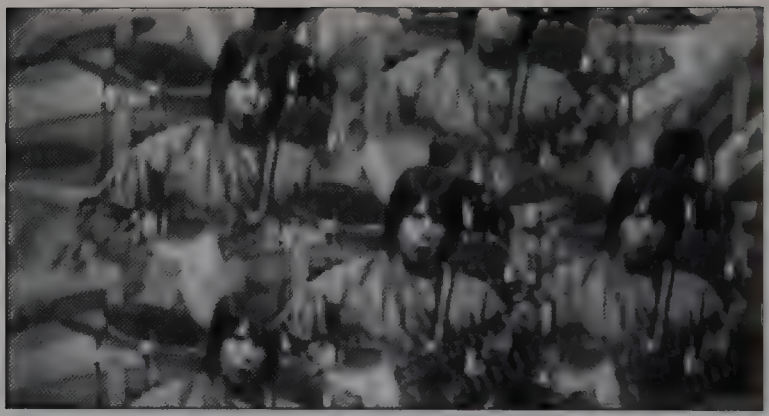


Figure 4.11: Nigel and his dual-neck guitar, psychedelically kaleidoscoped

'(Listen to the) Flower People' is quite vapid, indeed: its lyrics consist of nothing more than platitudes which vaguely allude to the dawn of some ill-defined new consciousness.[76] But, if the band's late-1960s *faux*-press conference is any indication, Spinal Tap sings the song completely unironically. When asked by a reporter to define Flower Power, David responds, with sublime vacuity, 'It's everything, isn't it? ... It's a feeling within. It's less of a power. If power is compared to light, we are the shadow rather than the power of light.'[77] In the performance of '(Listen to the) Flower People', David's wistful tone and the song's out-of-place Mozart reference are sure signs that the band takes itself, and its song's 'message', quite seriously – which is one of the main reasons that this scene is so funny. We can sense the band's pretensions growing.

In six short years, Spinal Tap's musical approach underwent dramatic changes: from the lyrically innocent country-blues of 'All the Way Home' to the fey, uninspired psychedelia of '(Listen to the) Flower People'. This evolution itself parodies the ways in which many rock bands changed their styles to conform to fashion – or, to put it more kindly, the fact that

many rock bands of this period took some time to find their voices, as it were. One of the most fascinating things about rock music is its protean nature: in just over half a century, it has splintered into countless hundreds of subgenres, many of which are simultaneously compelling and – especially when seen from the remove of a decade or two – risible.

Though, again, the film does not go into the details of the band's evolution from flower children to heavy metal musicians, such an evolution is far from uncommon in the history of rock 'n' roll – indeed, psychedelic music, especially so-called 'hard psych', is perhaps the single most important forerunner of heavy metal. Many metal bands began their careers as psychedelic outfits or were otherwise heavily influenced by the musical style and lyrical content of psychedelic rock. No lesser a star in the heavy metal firmament than Black Sabbath, in fact, made a number of blues-tinged psychedelic albums before delving more deeply into (and arguably inventing) heavy metal. The enormously influential band Hawkwind bridged the gaps between psychedelic rock, progressive rock and heavy metal (and their erstwhile bassist, Lemmy, went on to found the all-important metal band Motörhead). Numerous other groups of the late 1960s and early 1970s – Deep Purple, Amon Düül II, Iron Butterfly, Blue Cheer – made similar leaps from psychedelia to metal, with varying degrees of success and subsequent influence. As they always have been, and as they would continue to be, Spinal Tap, in crossing from one rock subgenre to another, were perfectly content not to blaze trails of their own but to go where the prevailing winds might blow them.

To say that a pointedly mediocre band such as Spinal Tap eventually found a home within the genre of heavy metal is not to say that heavy metal is particularly suited to mediocrity. On the contrary: metal has, especially in the last decade or so, proven itself to be one of the most varied, interesting

and resilient of rock genres. But it does have more than its share of fair-to-middling artists, many of whom, like Spinal Tap, rose to prominence in the late 1970s and early 1980s – bands like Ratt, Mötley Crüe and Dokken. Such bands' reliance on 'virtuosic' guitar solos, inane lyrics and outrageous costumes form one of the key reference points for Spinal Tap, even if these bands generally emerged not from psychedelia but from its cousin, glam rock. Another key musical touchstone for Spinal Tap are British journeyman groups such as Status Quo and Uriah Heep. These bands – whose names come up repeatedly in interviews with the film's creators – serve as models for Spinal Tap in a number of ways. First, they are both exceedingly long-lived: Uriah Heep has been together since 1969, and erstwhile pop-psych rockers Status Quo has been together since, incredibly, 1962 (as long as the Rolling Stones and one year less than reigning longevity champs Golden Earring).[78] More importantly, both bands, though occasionally slotted into one subgenre or another, play accessible, not-particularly-challenging rock music with a broad appeal: their fan bases, especially Status Quo's, are large and devoted. While Spinal Tap was not modelled specifically on either of these bands, they do seem to be, for a number of reasons, Tap's closest analogues.

The songs most closely associated with Spinal Tap – those which they perform in DiBergi's documentary of the 'Smell the Glove' tour, and which appear on the 1984 Polydor release *This Is Spinal Tap* – are extremely rich comic texts.[79] To a significant extent, it is with its songs' lyrics that *This Is Spinal Tap* has secured for itself a place in the annals of film comedy. In a film with far more than its share of funny moments, the lyrics to Spinal Tap's songs are major comic highlights. Furthermore, the scenes in which the band performs these songs are bountifully detailed parodies of all manner of heavy metal tropes and mannerisms.

Space prevents a detailed analysis of the comedic intricacies of each and every song Spinal Tap performs in the film; a close investigation of a small number of songs must suffice, and a logical place to begin is 'Heavy Duty'. In her book *Heavy Metal: The Music and Its Culture*, Deena Weinstein writes of and categorises a number of recurring tropes in the lyrical content of heavy metal songs. One of her principal categories is the 'Dionysian', into which she slots themes of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. Of these, Weinstein argues that the last is by far the most common and most important Dionysian theme in heavy metal. She writes: 'Writing and playing songs extolling the ecstasy that the music provides is almost a genre requirement.' Most of the songs which she cites as examples of this tendency 'simply praise, pledge allegiance to, and defend the music ... Rock, or rock and roll, is praised as a music that is wildly pleasurable, Dionysian in the strict sense of the term' (2000: 37).

The lyrical content of 'Heavy Duty' places it squarely in this tradition. The third verse, for instance, is:

> Don't need a woman, I won't take me no wife
> I get the rock and roll and that'll be my life
> No page in history, baby, that I don't need
> I just want to make some eardrums bleed.

The song actually strides a fine line between imitation and parody: if it were written and performed by, say, Dokken, it would be a paradigmatic example of the tendency that Weinstein identifies. And, in fact, with the exception of the chorus' pun on the word 'duty', and the bizarre outfit and expression which Viv wears during the performance of the song (Figure 4.12), 'Heavy Duty' is one of the least humorous songs that Spinal Tap performs. A metal fan uninitiated into the Cult of *Tap* might very well, on seeing the concert footage of this

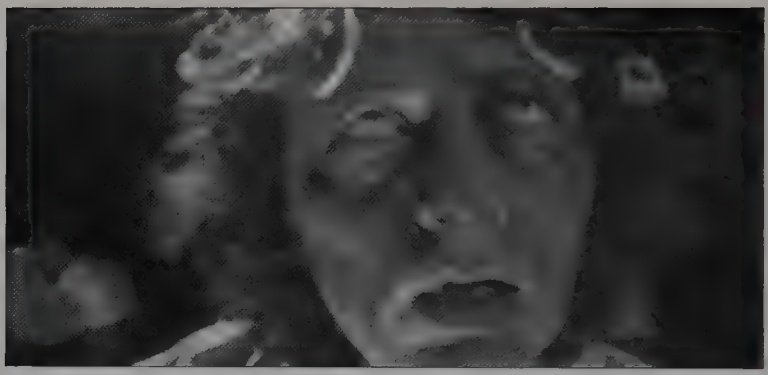


Figure 4.12: Viv Savage during the performance of 'Heavy Duty'

song for the first time, think it an unproblematic, non-parodic example of a certain type of heavy metal song – and he or she would not be incorrect. The function of 'Heavy Duty' seems not to be strictly comic, but, rather, to demonstrate Spinal Tap's ability to fulfill – but never exceed – the conventions of their chosen genre. 'Tonight I'm Gonna Rock You Tonight' performs much the same function.

Neither does Spinal Tap shy away from the sexual component of the Dionysian themes that Weinstein identifies. While 'Sex Farm' is a small masterpiece of *double-entendre* ('Crouching in your pea patch/Plowing through your beanfield/ Planting my seed'), 'Big Bottom', a favourite among Spinal Tap cultists, serves admirably as an exemplar of the band's parodic/sexual humour.

'Sex, in heavy metal's discourse', writes Weinstein,

> is sweaty, fun, and without commitments. It is generally not sadistic and it is always exuberant ... Sex in heavy metal is anything but respectable ... Physical beauty is not important; some of the women celebrated in heavy metal song, like AC/DC's Rosie ('Whole Lotta Rosie'), who weighs more than nineteen stone (180 lbs.), and

> Krokus' 'Smelly Nelly' would normally be considered unattractive or even sexually repulsive. (2000: 36)

Weinstein could well be writing about 'Big Bottom', whose lyrics, which merit inclusion in their entirety, are:

> The bigger the cushion, the sweeter the pushin'
> That's what I said
> The looser the waistband, the deeper the quicksand
> Or so I have read
>
> My baby fits me like a flesh tuxedo
> I'd like to sink her with my pink torpedo
>
> Big bottom, big bottom
> Talk about bum cakes, my girl's got 'em
> Big bottom, drive me out of my mind
> How could I leave this behind?
>
> I met her on Monday, 'twas my lucky bun day
> You know what I mean
> I love her each weekday, each velvety cheek day
> You know what I mean
>
> My love gun's loaded and she's in my sights
> Big game is waiting there inside her tights, yeah
>
> Big bottom, big bottom
> Talk about mud flaps, my girl's got 'em
> Big bottom, drive me out of my mind
> How could I leave this behind?

Unlike 'Heavy Duty', however, 'Big Bottom' is not merely an example of a certain tendency of heavy metal lyrics – it

is a parody *par excellence*, a status it achieves by pushing certain lyrical tropes to their limits. A consideration solely of the song's rhyme scheme yields copious comic treasures. Line-ending rhymes such as 'bottom/got 'em' and the immortal 'tuxedo/torpedo'[80] are, in themselves, unusually clever, but the song really raises the bar with its inspired *internal* rhymes. 'Cushion/pushin'', 'waistband/quicksand', 'Monday/bun day' and 'weekday/cheek day' possess obvious linguistic wit, but the real achievement of such rhymes is that they push the convention of metal's salacious lyrical content well beyond its normal bounds.

For comparison, consider a verse of the aforementioned Krokus song 'Smelly Nelly':

> You know crazy Nelly
> She's cross-eyed and dumb
> She's dirty and she's smelly
> But she's got a lovely bum
> Her hair is bloody grotty
> Her breath stinks like the pest
> Her skin is dry and spotty
> But her arse is just the best.[81]

One might make a case for this song being funny, but it evinces not even a whiff of wit. Spinal Tap uses hilarious euphemisms ('quicksand', 'bum cakes', 'love gun', 'mud flaps'[82]); Krokus employs only obvious gutterspeak. 'Big Bottom' is clever and allusive; 'Smelly Nelly' is baldly declarative. 'Big Bottom' is parody; 'Smelly Nelly' is self-parody.

The good-natured sexual humour of Spinal Tap's concert performance of the song increases its comic value: the band members waggle their posteriors, and DiBergi's cameras oblige with numerous low-angle compositions. Also, towards the end of the song, David and Derek use the headstocks

of their instruments to 'spank' Nigel. The performance also contains a clever musical pun: David, Nigel *and* Derek all play electric bass on this song (Derek's two-necked bass is a nice sight gag about overdesigned heavy metal instruments), a reference to the meaning of 'bottom' in musical argot.

Spinal Tap's performance of 'Stonehenge' is, arguably, the film's comedic centrepiece. Most obviously, this number features the aforementioned, now-legendary visual gag involving an 18-inch-tall megalith and two small men dressed as elves. 'Stonehenge' is also a fine example of the wit and parodic gifts of the makers of *This Is Spinal Tap*.

Deena Weinstein notes that heavy metal lyrics often borrow not only from the imagery of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but from fiction of the horror, gothic and sword-and-sorcery genres, such as the works of Poe, Lovecraft and Tolkien; she remarks that such imagery 'is particularly noticeable on album covers, posters, and stage sets' (2000: 39–40). Heavy metal bands such as Iron Maiden, Dio, Manowar, Saxon and countless others have employed such imagery on album covers, in videos and in concert; indeed, such a tradition extends back into pre-metal rock genres: see, for instance, the cover of Uriah Heep's 1972 prog/psych album *The Magician's Birthday* (Figure 4.13). The use of such 'deep' imagery in heavy metal may be seen as an attempt to bring some legitimacy and seriousness to a genre which has long suffered at the hands of music critics – whatever the reason, it is pervasive, and *Spinal Tap* lampoons it beautifully in 'Stonehenge'.

The performance of 'Stonehenge' begins with the band, enshrouded in fog and clad in dark cloaks and other gothic regalia (Viv wears a Viking helmet), striking 'ominous' notes amid sounds of billowing wind and unholy wailing. This posturing is a lead-in to Nigel's introduction to the song, which he speaks slowly and with the utmost conviction in the seriousness of his words.

Figure 4.13: The cover of Uriah Heep's 1972 album *The Magician's Birthday*

In ancient times
Hundreds of years before the dawn of history
Lived an ancient race of people
The Druids
No one knows who they were or what they were doing
But their legacy remains
Hewn into the living rock of Stonehenge

In 'Stonehenge', Druids represent the old, mystical England of cryptic rituals, but any attempt at conveying the weightiness of their mystical lithoglyphery is undercut by Nigel's absolutely straight-faced (and Cockney-accented) delivery of 'No one knows who they were or what they were doing' – a line which reveals not only the band's ham-fisted use of this imagery, but Nigel's own limited intellect. But the more serious undercutting of the song's mystic tone occurs a short while later.

The full lyrics of 'Stonehenge' name-check many of the most obvious tokens of the mystic: demons, banshees, the pipes of Pan, magic, the moon, dragons, virgins, devils, midnight, cats. That so many childish referents show up in the lyrics indicates Spinal Tap's lyrical clumsiness, as well as the

sharpness of *This Is Spinal Tap*'s parody. The songwriters have piled cliché atop cliché, and the effect is to lampoon not only Spinal Tap but the heavy metal genre for its use and reuse of tired imagery.

The song's final lines (And you, my love, won't you take my hand/We'll go back in time to that mystic land/Where the dewdrops cry and the cats meow/I will take you there/I will show you how) take the song's parody in new directions. The absurdist image of weeping dewdrops is evidence enough of Tap's lyrical deficiencies, but the incongruous inclusion of an element of romance effectively undermines any attempt at a serious tone. The nonsensical 'I will show you how' (how to do *what*?) has clearly been inserted because it rhymes and it fits the metre, not because it makes any sense within the context of the song.

Just when the band has effectively parodied itself with these lyrical missteps, Ian Faith, in his dogged insistence on using the minuscule Stonehenge prop, turns the entire performance into a rock 'n' roll travesty. Cleverly, the camera first shows us the descent of Stonehenge in a low-angle shot (Figure 4.14), a placement that makes the size of the object difficult to discern, and which allows us momentarily to consider that Ian has corrected the mistake. However, the next shot, in which David looks upward with an expression of extreme incredulity (Figure 4.15), lets us know that this is the same pocket-sized Stonehenge that we saw earlier in the film. That Nigel obliviously continues his portentous voice break and subsequent mandolin solo only enhances the humour of the moment: Spinal Tap's attempt to make serious music has been assaulted from all sides.

One final song merits close study, as it opened up other avenues of parody for the makers of *Spinal Tap*. 'Hell Hole' is, in its imagery of filth and decay, a fairly straightforward metal song, albeit cleverer than most. It stands apart from many

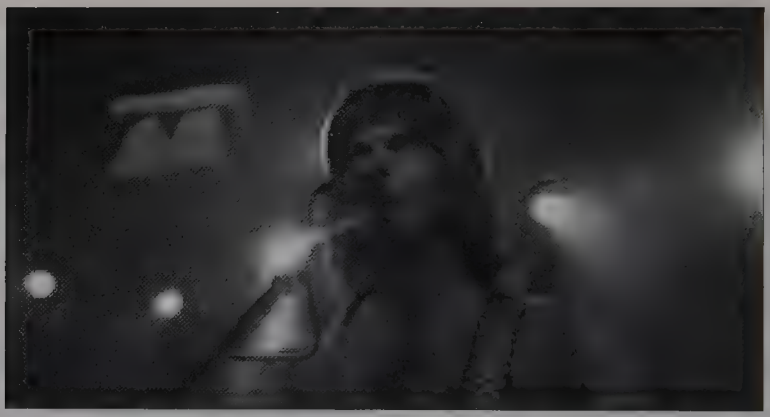


Figure 4.14: 'And, oh, how they danced, the little children of Stonehenge...'

Figure 4.15: David's reaction to the descent of the tiny Stonehenge prop

other such songs in its witty lyrics, its efficient, four-verse narrative arc and its inspired, highly catchy guitar riff.

The scene in which Spinal Tap perform 'Hell Hole' parodies heavy metal in a number of ways. Like the performance of 'Big Bottom', this number features many low-angle compositions, the better to emphasise the band members' spandex-enrobed trouser armadillos (Figure 4.16). The scene's central joke is Nigel's inability to stand up after the intensity of his

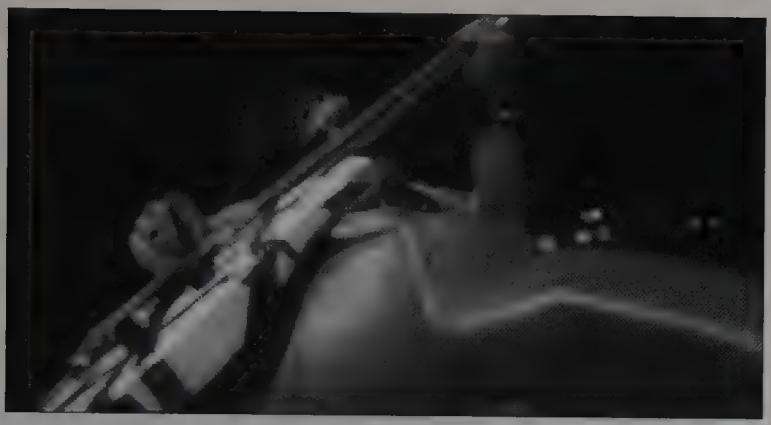


Figure 4.16: Spandex and armadillos: Derek performs 'Hell Hole'

guitar solo compels him to collapse on his back to the stage – he is rocking *that hard*. This gag parodies – that is, takes to a humorous, illogical extreme – a trope in heavy metal which Weinstein sums up nicely: 'Guitar solos are an essential part of the heavy metal code. ... [The solo] is a rhetorical element of the code that underscores the significance of the guitar' (2000: 24).

More interesting than the performance or even the song itself is the video for 'Hell Hole', which was directed by Guest and which received MTV airplay in 1983–84. When, in the early 1980s, it became clear that MTV could and would play a significant role in the music industry, savvy rock bands realised that jumping on the video bandwagon was essential to their commercial survival. Never ones to let a bandwagon pass them by, Spinal Tap climbed on; the 'Hell Hole' video, which has been included in nearly every home-viewing format of *This Is Spinal Tap*, provided the filmmakers with yet another forum for parody.

The 'Hell Hole' video brims with parodies of the clichés of this then-nascent form: scantily-clad women, imperfect lip-synching, multiple short scenes of the band in concert, fre-

quent frontal staging (Figure 4.17), egregious use of tacky video-editing effects (Figure 4.18 employs pixelation, colour desaturation *and* the 'rotating cube' effect), the use of midgets for 'comedy', and even slow-motion footage of someone (in this case, Nigel) emerging from a swimming pool.

While the 'Hell Hole' video is not actually part of *This Is Spinal Tap* proper, it is a key ancillary text that plays an important part in the film's cult reputation, not least for its keen parodying of MTV in general and heavy metal videos in particular. If nothing else, the video demonstrates that there exists no segment of the music industry in which Spinal Tap will not assert its mediocrity.

If Spinal Tap makes top-notch parodies of mediocre songs, does this make their music excellent or mediocre? That the answer is 'both' is one of the reasons that *This Is Spinal Tap* is such a compelling and enduring work. At times, the parodies which Spinal Tap performs actually surpass – in musicianship,

Figure 4.17: Frontal staging in the 'Hell Hole' video

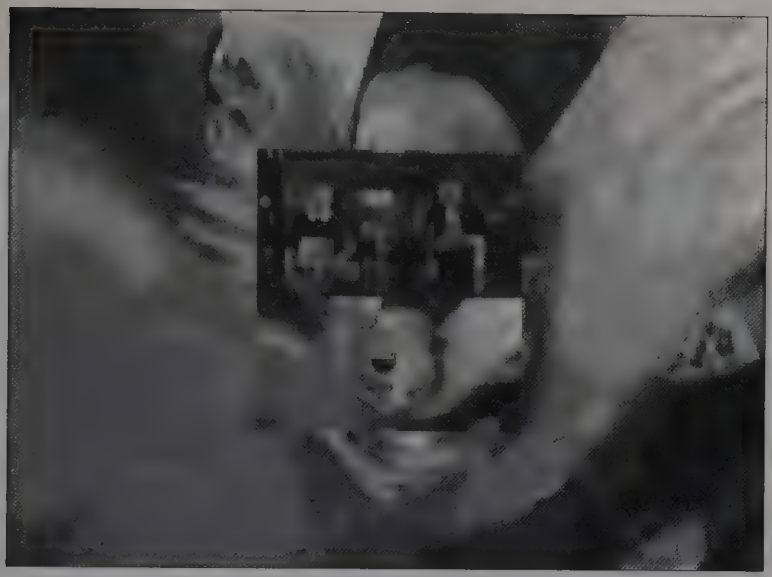


Figure 4.18: Bad video effects in the 'Hell Hole' video

in lyrical content, in 'riffage' – their objects of parody. As evidence for this claim, we need look no further than the marvellous *double-entendre* of 'Big Bottom': 'How could I leave this behind?', a line we would never find in a song by Manowar or W.A.S.P.; or to the terrific central riff of 'Hell Hole'. For these and other reasons detailed above, the musical numbers in *This Is Spinal Tap* are privileged sites of comedy.

This good-vs.-bad paradox is the perfect embodiment of the filmmakers' attitude towards rock music in general: they love it, and it means a great deal to them, but that will never stop them from making fun of it. Indeed, their obvious familiarity with and closeness to the music are among the many qualities which have made Reiner, Guest, McKean and Shearer the *de facto* parodists laureate of rock 'n' roll, and *This Is Spinal Tap* the single funniest movie ever made on the subject.

5

THE CULT OF *TAP*

The underlying assumption of this book is that *This Is Spinal Tap* is a cult film. But cult status, even if it is acquired informally and by unspoken consensus, must not be taken for granted. How does *Spinal Tap* – or any film – attain the status of a cult object, and what does it even mean for a film to be a cult film? Is there a canon of cult films, or is such a concept self-contradictory?

In May 2003, *Entertainment Weekly* compiled a list of the top fifty cult movies; on it were such perennials as *Harold and Maude* (1971), *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) and *Brazil* (1985), as well as slightly left-of-centre choices such as *The Best of Everything* (1959), *The Mack* (1973) and *The Five Deadly Venoms* (1978). Topping the list – beating out even *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* – is *This Is Spinal Tap* (Anon. 2003: 26–38). As justification for their choice, the authors offer the following: 'As antic as the Marx Brothers, more endearingly boneheaded than Homer Simpson, the men of Tap offer the *ne plus ultra* of the ultraridiculous – and a mother lode of quotable silliness, too' (Anon. 2003: 27).

Accurate though its assessment of *Spinal Tap* may be, the list raises some questions. Is it problematic for a mainstream publication such as *Entertainment Weekly* to produce an 'official' list of cult films, which by definition are so designated by audiences? Can we take seriously a list of the top cult films on which one of the supreme works of middlebrow Oscar-bait, *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), ranks number ten?[83] And what criteria do they use for these things, anyway? Ridiculousness and quotability surely *do* have much to do with *This Is Spinal Tap*'s cult status, but these standards do not hold for other films on the list, such as *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Un Chien Andalou* (1928) or *Akira* (1988).

Cult films are slippery beasts, largely because there is no established set of criteria by which they become cult objects. In determining what makes *This Is Spinal Tap* a cult film, it is useful to explore some of the ways that scholars have analysed the problem of cult films in general.

If there is a single thing about which nearly all theories of and approaches to cult films agree, it is that they are not generated in a vacuum. A film becomes a cult object through the actions of human agents: viewers, reviewers and fans of the film. The 'cultification' of a film is a bottom-up process: it is carried out by the 'end-users' of the film, *not* by its makers, nor by the company that released it.[84] J. P. Telotte, in what has become something of a canonical essay on the subject, argues that any consideration of cult films must take into account their audience, and their audience's 'seemingly unreasonable "love" for these films' (1991: 7). Bruce A. Austin expresses this idea more directly: 'Two items which tend *not* to define the cult film are the intent of the filmmaker and the film's content. Cult films are not *made* (as, for example, one sets out to make a musical, western, etc.) as much as they *happen* or *become*' (1981: 44).

Another common approach to cult films is to observe how they tap into the vernacular of one or more subcultures, thereby attracting niche audiences whose enthusiasm for these films runs deep. In their book *Midnight Movies*, J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum title one of their chapters with a list of some of the more prominent cult film subcultures: 'Rock, Drugs, Drag, Camp, Punk, Gore, and Agit-prop' (1983: 252). Each of these subcultures has a predisposition to subversion and destabilisation of the established order. Films which position themselves within the bounds of these subcultures (or films which are reclaimed by a subculture for embodying the values of that subculture: for instance, the reclamation of Doris Day's romantic comedies by certain gay audiences) may thereby attract a particularly devoted fanbase.

In his perceptive article on science fiction fandom, Nathan Hunt argues that a fan's ability to memorise and demonstrate knowledge of highly specialised trivia about a film is a way of acquiring 'cultural capital' within the specialised subculture/cult within which that film is positioned. 'Through their use of trivia,' Hunt writes, 'fans lay claim to having special access to, and hence dominion over, specific texts owing to their supposedly superior knowledge of them ... Trivia are used to establish who is an insider and to declare others to be outsiders who do not have the right to participate within fandom' (2003: 186). This desire for cultural capital, in turn, creates viewers who enjoy and celebrate certain films – and minutiae pertaining thereto – with unusual fervour.

While there are numerous approaches to the study of cult films, these three – the vital role of the audience in turning films into cult objects; cult films' usage of the specialised language of subcultures; the importance of trivia to film cultists – seem the most valuable, and the most germane to an analysis of *This Is Spinal Tap*. As discussed in chapter three, *Spinal Tap*'s creators lay the groundwork for their film's cult audience by

refusing to talk down to their audience, and by creating a text – and a central joke – which seemingly encouraged its own enrichment and expansion. But it is the viewers themselves who have taken the film and made it their own, through a process of quotation, citation, homage and, most importantly, participation in the film's humour. In a sense, this goes without saying – the cult film would not exist without its cult – but Telotte's and Austin's points are worth emphasising.

To take up Hoberman and Rosenbaum's argument, in that one of its principal subjects is rock music, *This Is Spinal Tap* has long been perfectly positioned to tap into the passions of the gargantuan, pre-existing fan base of music lovers. The fact that *Spinal Tap* focuses on a particular genre – heavy metal – does not compromise its potential appeal to rock music fans; in fact, if anything, this choice actually *broadens* the film's appeal. Metal detractors will find in the film ample confirmation of their dislike for the genre; metal fans can and will pick up on the film's affectionate treatment of its characters and their chosen genre, and can rest assured in the knowledge that the metal they like is better than that played by Spinal Tap.

Finally, the subject of trivia is quite relevant to *This Is Spinal Tap*. While Hunt's article focuses on films of the science fiction genre, his central argument can easily be extended to apply to films of any genre. Fans' ability to cite trivia is an important index of devotion, no matter whether the object of that devotion is a comedy, a musical, a western or a melodrama. Certainly, as even the briefest survey of alt.fan.spinal-tap demonstrates, the ability to quote from and refer to the film is the single most important way to assert one's membership in the *Spinal Tap* cult; those who misquote the film or provide erroneous information about it are quickly corrected and ridiculed by more sage members of the newsgroup. And, as it happens, *This Is Spinal Tap* is an eminently quotable film.

J.P. Telotte posits that, by definition, a cult film is a 'transgressive' work:

> What the film cultist embraces is a form that, in its very difference, transgresses, violates our sense of the reasonable. It crosses boundaries of time, custom, form, and – many might add – good taste. And this is the case whether we are talking about classical films that have been resurrected by a special audience and the popular 'midnight movies'. In fact, the popularity of both draws on their challenge to certain norms usually associated with the movie experience. (1991: 6)

But Telotte's argument does not hold when applied to *This Is Spinal Tap*. The film crosses none of the boundaries which he lists; it violates no norms. As discussed in chapter four, *Spinal Tap* is, in many ways, a rather traditional, classical film. Any challenges the film poses to classical style (for example, imperfect continuity) or classical narration (for example, its extended second act) are decidedly minor. And while *Spinal Tap* does 'transgress' – or, more simply, cross – genre lines, this act in itself is anything but unusual, and does not in itself guarantee cult status. (By that measure, the science fiction/romance *Starman* (1984), the horror/comedy *Arachnophobia* (1990) and the science fiction/western *Wild Wild West* (1999) would all be cult films, but this is not the case.) The strongest claim one could make for *Spinal Tap* as a transgressive work would probably be rooted in its status as a mock documentary. But this form does not pose particular challenges to a classical system, especially in such films as *This Is Spinal Tap*, *Drop Dead Gorgeous* or *Fear of a Black Hat* (1994), in which the mock-documentary format is little more than a pretext. Moreover, the film itself, as discussed in previous chapters, effectively shatters its own mock-documentary illusion in its

very first shot. While it is *possible* to misread the film as an actual documentary, such a reading is so dramatically incorrect that, in truth, it challenges no norms of movie-going. *This Is Spinal Tap* is not particularly transgressive.

In fact, *Spinal Tap* resists a fair number of attempts to explain the nature of its cult status. In many cases, a film achieves cult status when a number of devoted fans unite to reclaim it from the critics who initially maligned it; such a reclamation is a gesture of defiance and an assertion that the *hoi polloi* (or a self-selected segment thereof) are every bit as able as the self-appointed guardians of culture to identify and celebrate important works. The cult following for *Showgirls* (1995) is, in part, based on this kind of critical redemption.

Spinal Tap is different, however. As we have seen, not only were initial reviews of the film nearly universally positive, but its excellent reputation has remained steady or even improved in the intervening decades. Moreover, a critical re-evaluation of a film is not a necessary or sufficient condition for its cult status. Not only do films achieve cult status for a variety of reasons, but films which undergo critical re-evaluation do not necessarily become cult films.

Neither does *Spinal Tap* engage in any way in a camp aesthetic, which is the basis for the cult status of such films as *Pink Flamingos* (1972) or the melodramas of Douglas Sirk, such as *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) and *Written on the Wind* (1956). Neither is its cult status rooted in the 'so bad, it's good'/*Mystery Science Theater 3000* aesthetic that has elevated *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959) and *Eegah* (1962) to near-legendary standing. Many a film has attained its cult status by its inclusion of scenes of graphic sex, extreme gore or 'trippy' imagery: such rationales go a long way in explaining the cult status of, respectively, most Russ Meyer films, nearly all Herschell Gordon Lewis films and the works of Alejandro Jodorowsky. But none of these descriptions apply to

Spinal Tap. A film may attain cult status for any number of reasons; the list above hardly exhausts them. Still, it is interesting that *Spinal Tap* cannot be made to fit within many of the most important reasons that a film acquires a cult following.

All of these approaches to cult films are useful, to a limited extent. But in attempting to delineate the broad rules that govern the creation of every cult film, the theories tend to overlook some of the more basic, obvious reasons that films attain cult status. In truth, the reason for *Spinal Tap*'s cult reputation is quite simple: it is uncommonly, insightfully, remarkably funny. Good comedy in itself is more than sufficient to attract to a film a devoted audience: the urge to laugh is powerful and innate.

Spinal Tap's comedy is of that rarest of types: it remains as funny or funnier than it was upon the film's initial release, even after the passage of more than two decades. As rock music has become an ever more ubiquitous feature of global popular culture, the humour in *This Is Spinal Tap* has become ever more trenchant, for it parodies not only rock 'n' roll, but the semi-parasitic people and industries that have emerged to promote and valorise it. In showing Marty DiBergi and his film to be as pedestrian as the band whose tour he documents, *Spinal Tap* has anticipated and pre-parodied the vapidity of rockstar culture, which in recent years has metastasised on a global level; such prescience is a major reason for the film's cult status. So cleverly accurate is its parody that, as long as there are rock bands, *This Is Spinal Tap* will find an enthusiastic audience.

A cult cinema canon is decidedly difficult to determine. *Entertainment Weekly*'s list, cited above, is, really, neither better nor worse than any other such list we could compile. For how does one measure the ardour of one film's following to that of another's? Mere popularity will not suffice: cult audiences,

even those who admire mainstream films like *Casablanca* (1942) and *Star Wars* (1977), transcend raw attendance figures in making a film into an object of special meaning. If a film's popularity were sufficient cause to grant it cult status, *Erin Brockovich* and *Miss Congeniality* (both 2000) would have ardent cult followings.[85] But they do not.

It becomes very tricky to establish criteria for cult films, precisely because no two cult films are so valorised for exactly the same reasons. The only thing that these films really have in common is that they speak to their audiences – even, in many cases, unintended audiences – in special or unusual ways. Whether by engaging in a camp aesthetic, by the inclusion of excessive violence, by striking some kind of raw emotional nerve, or by offering itself up as an object of ridicule, a cult film provides for its devotees numerous sites to which they can attach their enthusiasm and loyalty.

For these reasons, establishing a canon of cult films is perhaps impossible: cult fandom is, at its root, an entirely subjective phenomenon. Is *This Is Spinal Tap* higher up in the cult film pantheon than *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) or *The Evil Dead* (1981) or *Blade Runner* (1982) or *Santa Sangre* (1989)? It depends on whom you ask. We can establish – as this book has attempted to – the nature and avidity of the *Spinal Tap* cult, but we should probably leave the rankings to the likes of *Entertainment Weekly*.

THE LEGACY OF *THIS IS SPINAL TAP*

Spinal Tap may problematise the ways in which cult films are canonised, but there is at least one key index by which we can measure its importance: by accounting for the many films which it has directly or indirectly influenced.

Previous chapters make brief reference to the mock documentaries which predate *This Is Spinal Tap: Las Hurdes, No*

Lies, The Falls, David Holzman's Diary, Cannibal Holocaust, and so on; *Spinal Tap* was by no means the first film to explore this idea. However, the film is very much at the root of the flowering of mock documentaries which has taken place in the two decades since it was released. It has become a genuine landmark, a touchstone.

Two groups of films are most obviously indebted to *This Is Spinal Tap*: a number of mock documentaries about music groups, and the films directed by Christopher Guest. The first group includes such films as *Fear of a Black Hat, CB4* (1993), and *Hard Core Logo* (1996), all of which use, to varying degrees of success, the format of the fake documentary to tell the story of a band's rise and fall, and to parody a particular branch of the music industry. The influence of *This Is Spinal Tap* on these films is plain.

The Guest films are the best-known and most popular progeny of *Spinal Tap*. *Waiting for Guffman, Best in Show* and *A Mighty Wind* – mock documentaries all, though to varying degrees – all feature several of the actors from Spinal Tap; moreover, these films, like *Spinal Tap*, feature largely improvised performances.[86] That these films have been influenced by *Spinal Tap* is, also, clear.

More than this, though, *This Is Spinal Tap*, in inspiring a great many followers, is partly responsible for making the mock documentary a part of mainstream cultural discourse. (Indeed, it is generally held to be the source of the portmanteau term 'mockumentary'.) The antecedents of *Spinal Tap* are scattered throughout the decades: a few mock documentaries in the 1930s, a few in the 1960s, a few in the 1970s and so on. Since its release, however, the number of film and television mock documentaries has increased dramatically. The list is long, and growing: *Bob Roberts, Man Bites Dog, Forgotten Silver* (1995), *Brass Eye* (1997), *Sweet and Lowdown* (1999), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Series 7* (2001),

The Office (both the UK (2001–2003) and US (2005–present) versions), *Reno 911!* (2003–present), *Drawn Together* (2004–present), *18 Fingers of Death!* (2006) and many others.[87] The mere fact that these films and programmes were made after *This Is Spinal Tap* does not guarantee that it is the most important influence on all of them. However, the popularity, reputation and cult following of the film is so strong – especially among those in the film and television industries – that it would be foolish to deny that *Spinal Tap* is, in many ways, the spiritual godfather of most or all of these works. *This Is Spinal Tap* did not invent the mock documentary, but it did grant the form a far greater cultural currency than it had ever achieved.

It is somewhat tempting to read the recent rise of mock documentaries as an indicator that we are now living in a highly ironic age – that we are no longer satisfied with mere texts, but require texts that comment upon themselves, subvert themselves or otherwise distance themselves from the viewer. While it is difficult to deny the near-unavoidable prevalence of garden-variety irony in popular culture of the last two decades, *zeitgeist* arguments such as this are ultimately very difficult to posit in historical terms, especially since we can find similar fakery in *Las Hurdes* and *The War of the Worlds* radio broadcast (1938). The actuality of the situation may be far simpler: *This Is Spinal Tap*, in its prescient comedy and clever use of the mock documentary form, inspired a great many followers and imitators, some of whom took this form in slightly more ironic (that is to say, less affectionately parodic) directions. The argument about the irony *zeitgeist* can be explained by restating it so that it addresses not grand questions about human culture, but smaller-scale questions about the historical development of a subgenre. In this reconfigured argument, *This Is Spinal Tap* assumes a prominent place.

Spinal Tap has been integrated into popular culture in non-cinematic ways, as well. Linguistically, it has contributed to not just 'mockumentary', but the widely-recognised phrases 'up to eleven', 'none more black', 'Hello, Cleveland!' and 'It's such a fine line between stupid and clever.' Enter 'spinal tap' into any internet search engine, and chances are excellent that the medical procedure from which the band takes its name will be pushed down the page by results pertaining to the band or the film. If the frequency with which a film is quoted or cited – in conversation, in print, in other media – is an index of its place in the pop culture pantheon, then *This Is Spinal Tap* has surely achieved an exalted status afforded few others.

Though admittedly puzzled by the nature of the cult of *Spinal Tap*, Christopher Guest characterises the phenomenon as well as may be possible:

> What we've seen ... when we've played live recently is that people want to feel as if they're part of the movie. Because they were the audience watching this movie, the audience that comes to the show – this sort of is a circular thing – feel as if they are now in the movie, in a funny way, and they become the audience in the movie. And it's very difficult to separate. It's a very bizarre phenomenon that's hard to explain ... Are they joking, or do they know that we're...? At what point does this become real and imagined?[88]

I have seen very few films as often as I have seen *This Is Spinal Tap*. The combination of cable television programming practices in the mid-1980s and my teenage television addiction have secured this status for only a few films; various research projects have secured it for others. *Spinal Tap* is one of the few films that, for me, is as rewarding on a schol-

arly level as it is on the level of personal enjoyment. At this point, what impresses me most about the film is not how clever or prescient it is – I realised these things long ago – but how enduring that cleverness and prescience is. The film was perceptive upon its release in 1984, and, amazingly, it is still perceptive – almost clairvoyant. *This Is Spinal Tap* is a remarkably rich film, and all the more so for remaining fresh and intelligent after more than twenty years. By now, I've seen the film easily forty or fifty times, and I *still* laugh out loud when Nigel says 'That's nitpicking, isn't it?', when the airport security guard gives Derek that look of utter perplexity, at the spoken introduction to 'Stonehenge'. If this volume contributes in some small way to the persistence or growth of the cult of *This Is Spinal Tap*, I would consider it a case of my membership dues finally being paid.

APPENDIX

THIS IS SPINAL TAP SEGMENTATION

The following segmentation of *This Is Spinal Tap* includes relevant events, characters and themes; approximate running times of each scene are in parentheses, and song titles are in quotation marks.

0. Opening titles (0:00–0:18)

I. Marty DiBergi's introduction (0:18–1:52)

II. Spinal Tap arrives in the US; road crew loads in their gear (1:52–2:45)

III. First concert: New York City (2:45–4:08)
   a. 'Tonight I'm Gonna Rock You Tonight'
   b. Introductions of band members

IV. 'Castle' interview, part one (4:08–6:28)
   a. Origins of Tap
   i. Video flashback: The Thamesmen:

'Gimme Some Money'

ii. Deaths of drummers John 'Stumpy' Pepys and Eric 'Stumpy Joe' Childs

V. Opening night Polymer Records party, New York City (6:28–8:20)

a. The band meets Bobbi Flekman, Sir Denis Eton-Hogg

VI. In the limousine (8:20–10:02)

a. Introduction to Ian Faith

b. First suggestion that Spinal Tap's popularity is waning

VII. Second concert: Fidelity Hall, Philadelphia (10:02–12:03)

a. 'Big Bottom'

VIII. 'Castle' interview, part two (12:03–12:51)

a. Marty reads to the band several scathing reviews of their albums

IX. Recording Industry Convention, Atlanta (12:51–13:27)

a. The Boston gig has been cancelled

X. Polymer Records reception, undisclosed location (13:27–16:51)

a. Polymer Records is unhappy with the proposed cover for *Smell the Glove*

XI. Marty interviews Nigel and David about their childhood friendship (16:51–18:44)

a. 'All the Way Home'

XII. Backstage, Vandermint Auditorium, Chapel Hill, NC (18:44–20:24)
   a. Nigel's difficulties with snacks

XIII. Third concert: Chapel Hill (20:24–21:41)
   a. 'Hell Hole'

XIV. Marty interviews Nigel in his guitar room (21:41–23:50)

XV. Hotel lobby, Memphis (23:50–26:52)
   a. Complications with room reservations
   b. Rock star Duke Fame snubs Spinal Tap
   c. Memphis gig is cancelled

XVI. Marty interviews Ian in his office (26:52–27:51)
   a. Spinal Tap's 'appeal is becoming more selective'

XVII. Hotel suite, Memphis (27:51–29:59)
   a. David speaks to his girlfriend, Jeanine, on the phone; she will meet up with the band in Milwaukee
   b. Radio station plays The Thamesmen's 'Cups and Cakes'; DJ refers to Spinal Tap's residence in the 'Where Are They Now?' file

XVIII. At Graceland (29:59–31:19)
   a. David, Nigel, and Derek misharmonise on 'Heartbreak Hotel' at Elvis's graveside

XIX. 'Castle' interview, part three (31:19–33:20)
   a. Video flashback: 'Listen to the Flower People'
   b. Death of Peter 'James' Bond

XX. Soundcheck, Shank Hall, Milwaukee (33:20–36:22)
  a. Rehearsal: 'Gimme Some Money'
  b. Jeanine arrives
  c. Ian arrives with copies of *Smell the Glove*, with its entirely black cover

XXI. Fourth concert: Shank Hall, Milwaukee (36:22–39:05)
  a. 'Rock 'n' Roll Creation'

XXII. Hotel bathroom: Marty interviews Mick about the 'drummer curse' (39:05–39:32)

XXIII. On the tour bus, between venues (39:32–40:26)

XXIV. Marty interviews David (40:26–41:29)
  a. Jeanine's and David's interest in yoga, astrology, etc.
  b. Allusions to antipathy between Jeanine and Nigel

XXV. In recording studio, Nigel plays piano for Marty (41:29–42:36)
  a. 'Lick My Love Pump'

XXVI. Airport: Derek has trouble getting through security (42:36–43:57)

XXVII. Fifth concert, Chicago (43:57–45:20)
  a. 'Heavy Duty Rock 'n' Roll'

XXVIII. Holiday Inn, Chicago (45:20–46:15)
  a. The band meets Polymer rep Artie Fufkin

XXIX. Disc 'n' Dat Record Store, Chicago (46:15–47:35)
   a. No one shows up for the *Smell the Glove* in-store promotion

XXX. (Would-be) sixth concert, Xanadu Star Theater, Cleveland (47:35–49:45)
   a. Spinal Tap gets lost going from the dressing room to the stage

XXXI. Band meeting, Season's Restaurant, Cleveland (49:45–52:49)
   a. Jeanine and David present their idea for the band's 'new image': elaborate costumes and make-up based on the signs of the zodiac
   b. Nigel proposes they build a replica of Stonehenge to display during live versions of the song of the same name; he sketches his idea on a napkin, and Ian agrees to have the 18-feet-tall model constructed

XXXII. Second part of Marty's interview with Nigel in his guitar room (52:49–53:48)
   a. Footage of Nigel in concert, strumming his guitar with both a violin and his feet

XXXIII. Ian meets Polly Deutsch, Austin (53:48–54:45)
   a. Polly has built the model of Stonehenge, but at 18 inches, not 18 feet: Nigel had mislabeled his sketch

XXXIV. Seventh concert, Austin (54:45–57:32)
   a. 'Stonehenge'
   b. The tiny Stonehenge model ruins the concert

XXXV. Hotel room, Austin, after the concert (57:32–1:01:05)
   a. David is angry with Ian about the Stonehenge incident
   b. David and Jeanine suggest that Jeanine can help Ian manage the band
   c. Ian quits as manager

XXXVI. Airport waiting area, presumably in Austin (1:01:05–1:02:05)
   a. Jeanine, now Spinal Tap's *de facto* manager, displays her new astrologically-themed chart for managing the band's affairs; Nigel is upset

XXXVII. Marty interviews Nigel (1:02:05–1:02:38)
   a. Nigel says that he and David are 'closer than brothers'

XXXVIII. In recording studio (1:02:38–1:03:34)
   a. David and Nigel argue about David's guitar playing
   b. Nigel accuses David of being unable to concentrate due to Jeanine's influence

XXXIX. Marty interviews Derek, undisclosed location (1:03:34–1:03:58)

XL. Spinal Tap arrives in Seattle (1:03:58–1:04:26)
   a. The original gig has been cancelled; Jeanine has booked the band into an Air Force base

XLI. Eighth concert, Lindberg Air Force Base, Seattle (1:04:26–1:07:13)
   a. Band greeted by Lieutenant Robert Hookstratten

b. 'Sex Farm Woman'
    i. Nigel quits mid-song

XLII. Hotel room, Seattle, after the show (1:07:13–1:08:23)
a. David downplays the effect of Nigel's departure on Spinal Tap

XLIII. Themeland Amusement Park, Stockton, California (1:08:23–1:09:30)
a. Derek suggests that the Nigel-less Spinal Tap play 'Jazz Odyssey'; David resists

XLIV. Ninth concert, Themeland Amusement Park (1:09:30–1:10:12)
a. Spinal Tap plays 'Jazz Odyssey' to a very unenthusiastic crowd

XLV. End-of-tour party, Los Angeles (1:10:12–1:12:04)
a. Derek and David discuss how Nigel's departure has given them the 'freedom' to explore solo projects they'd been wanting to do; they resign themselves to the end of Spinal Tap

XLVI. Backstage, before the farewell gig, Los Angeles (1:12:04–1:14:58)
a. Nigel arrives unexpectedly: he has learned from Ian that 'Sex Farm Woman' is in the charts in Japan; would the band be interested in re-forming for a Japanese tour? David resists, but is clearly intrigued.

XLVII. Tenth concert, Los Angeles (1:14:58–1:17:25)

a. 'Tonight I'm Gonna Rock You Tonight'
b. Nigel, in the wings, is invited onstage by David, to the delight of the crowd: Spinal Tap has re-united
c. Mick Shrimpton explodes
d. 'Tonight I'm Gonna Rock You Tonight' continues uninterrupted as the location changes to Kobe Hall, Tokyo, where the band is adored
    i. Ian, in the wings, has resumed his duties as manager

(three seconds of black leader separate Scene XLVII from Scene XLVIII)

XLVIII. Interviews / closing credits (1:17:28–1:22:35)
a. Under the scrolling closing credits, Marty interviews the members of the band on such subjects as their audience, their personal philosophies and what they would be doing if they were not in a rock band.

NOTES

1 See Janet Maslin's review of the film in the *New York Times*, 2 March 1984, p. C6.

2 Well-known in the *Spinal Tap* fan community is the fact that this gag is the one vestige of a deleted subplot about the band members' dalliances with the comely lead singer of their opening act. My own opinion is that the gag plays much better divorced from this subplot – a testament, perhaps, to the merciless skill with which the film was edited.

3 A massively useful source of information on the New Wave of British Heavy Metal is the website www.nwobhm.com (accessed 10 July 2006).

4 Rob Reiner has said that 'Marty DiBergi' is a portmanteau reference to several filmmakers: Martin Scorsese, Brian De Palma, Steven Spielberg and either Federico Fellini or Michelangelo Antonioni (Rob Reiner, DVD commentary, *This Is Spinal Tap* (Criterion, 1998), *c.* 16:32).

5 Rob Reiner, DVD commentary, *This Is Spinal Tap* (Criterion, 1998), *c.* 19:44; *c.* 38:33.

6 An important recent exception to the notion that cult films are developed not in the boardroom but in the movie theatre is the 2006 release *Snakes on a Plane*. An action picture about, er, snakes on a plane, the film completed principal photography in September 2005. However, in late 2005 and early 2006, when word about the film and its gleefully preposterous premise began to spread, count-

less bloggers and web designers began creating their own websites, posters, slogans, theme songs, trailers and even t-shirts for the film. Most such creations treated the film with a mix of ridicule and awe – a fecund combination for a cult following.

Upon realising that they had a groundswell on their hands, New Line Cinema arranged for several days of reshoots which were specifically designed to capitalise on *Snakes on a Plane*'s pre-emptive cult status. Among these reshoots were scenes in which Samuel L. Jackson, the star of the film, says, 'I want these motherfucking snakes off this motherfucking plane', a catchphrase taken directly from an online parody of the film. (See <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr/film/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1002234847> (accessed 11 September 2006).)

Snakes on a Plane is a complicated example. The online buzz about the film probably would have made it into a cult film even if New Line had not scheduled the reshoots. As it is, however, this decision alienated some potential cultists, who saw New Line's tactics as rather mercenary. On the other hand, this situation is one of the very rare examples of a film's fans directly influencing the content of the film – a fact sure to please a great many other potential cultists, who (rightly) feel that they served as *de facto* creative consultants. (For an astute take on the repercussions of this kind of quasi-populist film design and marketing, see Chuck Klosterman, 'The "Snakes on a Plane" Problem', *Esquire*, August 2006 (Vol. 146, Issue 2), available online at <http://www.esquire.com/features/articles/2006/060706_mfe_August_06_Klosterman.html> (accessed 19 August 2006).)

The punchline to the *Snakes on a Plane* saga is that the film performed disappointingly at the box office: this $33 million film had grossed, by late August 2006, just over $26 million. (See <http://imdbcom/title/tt0417148/business> (accessed 11 September 2006).)

Also, other, smaller film studios – Troma is the most important recent example, but surely the model is Roger Corman's American International Pictures – have consistently released inexpensive exploitation films which are clearly designed to nurture a cult audience. Common techniques for so doing involve the inclusion of plentiful nudity, graphic violence, patently ludicrous narrative premises, or some combination of these and/or other elements. For Troma, this strategy has met with some degree of financial

success, but a relatively small degree of cult success: *The Toxic Avenger* (1985) is probably the studio's most 'genuine' cult film. On the other hand, Troma has branded itself quite well, and there are plenty of film enthusiasts whose cultlike devotion to the studio itself surpasses their devotion for any of its particular films.

7 Reiner has for years insisted that directorial credit for *Spinal Tap* should properly include Guest, McKean and Shearer, as well, but the Directors Guild of America would not permit it. Similarly, the Writers Guild of America prohibited the film's creators from assigning writing credit to the entire cast. (Rob Reiner, DVD commentary, *This Is Spinal Tap* (Criterion, 1998), *c.* 1:09.)

8 *Ghostbusters* grossed about $230 million. (See http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=ghostbusters.htm (accessed 16 September 2006).)

9 Karen Murphy, DVD commentary, *This Is Spinal Tap* (Criterion, 1998), *c.* 1:14:19.

10 The choice to use Super 16mm film (as opposed to 'regular' 16mm film) was a savvy one. The aspect ratio of 16mm is 1.33:1; that of Super 16mm is 1.67:1 – a small difference, but one which links the format more closely with cinema than with television. Furthermore, blowing up a Super 16mm print to 35mm is simpler and more straightforward than blowing up a 16mm print. Contemporaneous Hollywood films also shot in Super 16mm include Robert Altman's *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* (1982) and Spike Lee's first feature, *She's Gotta Have It* (1986).

11 Harry Shearer, DVD commentary, *This Is Spinal Tap* (Criterion, 1998), *c.* 14:34.

12 Christopher Guest, DVD commentary, *This Is Spinal Tap* (Criterion, 1998), *c.* 15:15.

13 The amount of the advance is variously reported as $50,000 and $60,000.

14 All information on *This Is Spinal Tap*'s release dates and box-office figures is from Box Office Mojo's page for the film: <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=thisisspinaltap.htm> (accessed 29 June 2006).

15 See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0087332/business> (accessed 29 June 2006) and <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=ghostbusters.htm> (accessed 11 May 2007). Even this screen count is low by present standards: the 2005 blockbuster *War of the Worlds* played, at its widest release, on 3,908 screens – three

times as many as *Ghostbusters*. (See <http://us.imdb.com/title/tt0407304/business> (accessed 29 June 2006).)

16 The film was re-released on a limited basis in 2000, thereby pushing its total theatrical gross to about $4.73 million.

17 Examples of such films abound: Alejandro Jodorowsky's *The Holy Mountain* (1973), for instance, or the famous 'Censored 11' Warner Bros. cartoons – films which, through their very scarcity, have given rise to devoted followings.

18 *New York Times*, 5 March 1984, C12.

19 *New York Times*, 13 May 1984, H18. The blurb is by Stephen Schaefer of *US Magazine*.

20 In her book on heavy metal, Deena Weinstein writes at some length on the aesthetics of metal bands, their album covers and their logos. 'Although each band tends to use a distinctive typeface, there is a similarity among those used in the genre ... Gently rounded typefaces are avoided, since they communicate an image of softness. The ubiquitous Helvetica typeface ... is also rejected. Helvetica, lacking embellishments of any kind, suggests neutrality, efficiency, and order, all of which are antithetical to heavy metal. The minimum requirements for a heavy metal typeface are angularity and thickness. The typefaces are more elaborate than mere block lettering, incorporating a multitude of oblique angles and rather squared-off ends. Some resemble runic, Teutonic lettering. Others have a menacing, armour-breaking mace or sawtooth appearance' (2000: 27–8).

21 For an informative and enjoyable article on the 'Heavy Metal Umlaut' ('the diacritical mark of the beast'), see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heavy_metal_umlaut> (accessed 27 June 2006).

22 Rob Reiner, DVD commentary, *This Is Spinal Tap* (Criterion, 1998), *c.* 1:06:59.

23 This line was also used in many promotional materials.

24 Three representative commercials appear on the MGM DVD of *This Is Spinal Tap*.

25 Conceivably, the first of these song titles is a reference to Iron Maiden's well-known song 'Flight of Icarus', from their 1983 album *Piece of Mind*.

26 Rob Reiner, DVD commentary, *This Is Spinal Tap* (Criterion, 1998), *c.* 41:27.

27 Robert Leighton, DVD commentary, *This Is Spinal Tap* (Criterion,

1998), *c.* 1:11:15.

28 See, respectively, Kim Newman, '*This Is Spinal Tap*' (review), *BFI Monthly Film Bulletin*, September 1984, 64, 608, 285; Archer Winsten, '*This Is Spinal Tap*' (review), *New York Post*, 2 March 1984, 19; Wayne Robins, '*This Is Spinal Tap*' (review), *New York Newsday*, 2 March 1984, Part II, 6; Sally Hibbin, '*Spinal Tap*' [sic] (review), *Films and Filming*, September 1984, 360, 42.

29 For example, three small-budget 1984 comedies that received extensive video and cable-television exposure, *Hot Dog ... The Movie*, *Protocol* and *Moscow on the Hudson*, do not have substantial cult followings, even though each of these films made over $20 million in their US theatrical releases and therefore by definition reached a wider audience than did *Spinal Tap*. This is cherry-picking, of course, but it illustrates the point that there is no secret formula for constructing a cult film: it rests almost entirely in the hands of the audience. (See, respectively, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=hotdogthemovie.htm>, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=protocol.htm>, and <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=moscowonthehudson.htm> (all accessed 29 June 2006).)

30 See <http://lebowskifest.com> (accessed 26 August 2006).

31 In the DVD age, the distinction between CAV and CLV laserdiscs has been nearly forgotten, but it was quite meaningful to home-video enthusiasts in the early 1990s. The CLV (Constant Linear Velocity) format was the default, 'normal' format for laserdiscs: it offered only standard playback, with few bells and whistles (though the discs often included their films' theatrical trailers). By a great majority, most laserdiscs were released in CLV. CAV (Constant Angular Velocity), on the other hand, was capable of supporting a number of additional features, such as slow-motion, reverse play and a very clean freeze-frame. Because media stored in CAV format take up more physical space on the disc than media stored in CLV format, films released in CAV were often multi-disc affairs. The CAV format imparted unto laserdiscs a certain level of 'specialness' – they were the choice of the serious cinephile.

32 See <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/new-for-you/top-sellers/-/dvd/all/ref=pd_dp_ts_d_1/002-3726460-2935246> (accessed 1 September 2006; statistics change hourly).

33 Steve Swasey, Director of Corporate Communications, Netflix, Inc.

Email to the author, 11 September 2006.

34 Vernetta Williams, Account Executive, Criterion Pictures. Interview with the author, 30 August 2006. According to Williams, *The Princess Bride*, for comparison, was, in 2006, rented 101 times. (Figures include rental of 35mm and 16mm prints, as well as licensed video showings of the films.)

35 For these purposes, 'second wave' refers to reviews and articles written in the wake of the 1992 release of *Break Like the Wind*, and the band's subsequent tour; the 'third wave' is marked by the film's 2000 video and theatrical rerelease.

36 The list is topped by *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), with a rating of 8.7. (See <http://imdb.com/chart/1980s>, accessed 25 August 2006.)

37 In 1992, when the *Break Like the Wind* album was released, compact discs were, in the US, commonly offered for sale in rigid cardboard 'longboxes', which were rightly considered to be especially egregious examples of excessive packaging. In response to the 'Ban the Box' movement which arose around this time, Spinal Tap somehow convinced MCA Records to release *Break Like the Wind* in a special 'extra-long box'. I mention this because I happen to find it hilarious.

38 See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spinal_Tap_discography> (accessed 25 August 2006).

39 In interviews, Occhiogrosso keeps up the act, referring to Derek Smalls, Nigel Tufnel and David St. Hubbins as actual people, not as characters. (See <http://spinaltapfan.com/articles/occhio.html> (accessed 27 August 2006).)

40 In the interest of full disclosure: in 1999, Rowe published on his site an academic paper I had written about mock documentaries, a fact which indirectly led to my writing this book.

41 See <http://www.eye.net/eye/issue/issue_01.04.96/FILM/vj0104.php> (accessed 28 August 2006).

42 Google maintains an archive of posts to this newsgroup at <http://groups.google.com/group/alt.fan.spinal-tap/about> (accessed 27 August 2006).

43 See <http://groups.google.com/group/alt.fan.spinal-tap/browse_frm/month/1993-09> (accessed 27 August 2006).

44 youtube.com is also valuable to Tapheads for its archive of heavy metal videos from the early 1980s. Searches for, for instance, Dok-

ken's 'Breaking the Chains', Rush's 'Xanadu', or, most remarkably, Saxon's and Judas Priest's shared 1980 performance on *Top of the Pops* yields a trove of primary source material on which *This Is Spinal Tap* was directly and/or indirectly based.

45 See <http://vinyltap.bizhosting.com/> (accessed 26 August 2006). The site seems suspiciously ill-maintained, so it is difficult to confirm whether Vinyl Tap is still out there somewhere.

46 Rob Reiner, DVD commentary, *This Is Spinal Tap* (Criterion, 1998), *c.* 1:17:48.

47 See, respectively, the entry for 24 June 2004, at <http://www.thedarknessrock.com/tourdiary/>, and the entry for 25 March 2005, at <http://www.moby.com/atlanta_3> (both sites accessed 27 August 2006).

48 Rob Reiner, DVD commentary, *This Is Spinal Tap* (Criterion, 1998), *c.* 1:17:20.

49 On the commentary track, Guest remarks that recording live concert audio caused too many technical problems, such as varying volume levels and the necessity of playing along to a 'click track'. (Christopher Guest, DVD commentary, *This Is Spinal Tap* (Criterion, 1998)), *c.* 44:30.

50 The only time that any characters acknowledge the camera occurs in the scene in which Jeanine arrives in Milwaukee, and David informs her that DiBergi's crew is making a documentary about the band. This moment is narratively motivated: the characters do not acknowledge the camera for the sake of making a joke about referentiality. Reiner has said: 'We thought of breaking the fourth wall a number of times, but it didn't really make sense' (Rob Reiner, DVD commentary, *This Is Spinal Tap* (Criterion, 1998), *c.* 34:27).

51 Rob Reiner, DVD commentary, *This Is Spinal Tap* (Criterion, 1998), *c.* 14:43.

52 A Real Video version of *Swiss Spaghetti Harvest* can be found at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/olmedia/70000/video/_70980_aprilfool_vi.ram>. Fairly comprehensive lists of mock documentaries can be found at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mockumentary> and <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/mockumentaries.html> (all sites accessed 5 July 2006).

53 Interestingly, both *No Lies* and *David Holzman's Diary*, like *This Is Spinal Tap* (and many other classical films, be they mock documentaries or not), feature as their central narrative complications a frac-

tious heterosexual relationship.

54 Rob Reiner, DVD commentary, *This Is Spinal Tap* (Criterion, 1998), *c.* 1:07:09.

55 Harry Shearer, DVD commentary, *This Is Spinal Tap* (Criterion, 1998), *c.* 13:51.

56 Even this seemingly reasonable assumption – that the intent of comedies is to produce laughter – is controversial, and with good reason: certain modes of comedy are humorous without generating laughter. The literature on comedy studies is vast; for one engagement with this subject, see Walter Sorrell (1972) *Facets of Comedy* New York: Grosset & Dunlap, especially 13–28.

57 Allegedly, the 'Stonehenge' gag was inspired by Black Sabbath's 1983 concert tour in support of their album *Born Again* (which contains an instrumental entitled 'Stonehenge'); on this tour, the band employed a replica of Stonehenge so massive that it could not fit on the stage of most of the venues at which they performed. (See <http://www.spinaltapfan.com/articles/stonehenge.html>, accessed 14 August 2006.) The connection to Black Sabbath is plausible: the *Born Again* tour lasted from August 1983 to March 1984, a period which overlaps with the shooting dates of *This Is Spinal Tap.* (See <http://www.black-sabbath.com/tourdates/1983.html> (accessed 14 August 2006).)

58 The 1082-second figure was attained by adding the durations of the film's scenes of musical performance – both concert performances and archival footage. Several quasi-musical numbers were *not*, however, considered in arriving at this figure. The scenes whose durations were not included in this tally are: Nigel's and David's impromptu rendition of 'All the Way Home'; the scene in which 'Cups and Cakes' plays on the radio in the hotel room; the flubbed rendition of 'Heartbreak Hotel'; the brief rehearsal version of 'Gimme Some Money'; Nigel's rendition of 'Lick My Love Pump'; and the scene in the studio in which David repeatedly botches a guitar part. The music in all of these scenes plays more like 'incidental' music than it does as the music of a fully-fledged musical number, though this is of course arguable. One 'number' which, however, *has* been included in the 1082-second tally is the 45-second scene in which Nigel plays one of his famous guitar solos; I've considered this a proper musical number because it is clearly meant to be seen as an excerpt from a larger scene of musical performance.

59 The two rightmost columns consider the start and end points of each musical number with regard to, respectively, running time and percentage. For example, 'Bless Your Beautiful Hide' starts at the 4:14 mark, which is 4.15 per cent of the way into the film's total running time, and ends at the 6:43 mark, which is 6.58 per cent of the way into the film's total running time.

60 It is true that Adam's conception of romantic love is still a bit fuzzy: at the end of his rendition of the song, he says to Gideon, as Milly listens in with a horrified look on her face, that 'one woman's pretty much like the next'. Clearly, he has not fully learned his lesson. So, while Adam's singing this song does represent a narrative shift (in that he now *thinks* he understands the concept of romantic love), it is not a 180-degree shift: this occurs in the film's final act.

61 The film uses scenes of musical performance as narrative 'book-ends'. That 'Tonight I'm Gonna Rock You Tonight' has a privileged place at both the beginning and end of the film imparts to it a degree of classical closure.

62 The single most influential screenwriting 'guru', Syd Field, in his widely-read and oft-updated book *Screenplay* (originally published in 1979), preaches a hardline version of the three-act structure, specifying to the minute when certain key narrative developments should occur.

63 The audio-only role of this announcer is played by Harry Shearer.

64 Rob Reiner, DVD commentary, *This Is Spinal Tap* (Criterion, 1998), *c.* 53:41.

65 This type of 'say one thing, do the opposite' gag is quite common, incidentally, in Hollywood comedies.

66 Harry Shearer, DVD commentary, *This Is Spinal Tap* (Criterion, 1998), *c.* 28:24.

67 Rob Reiner, DVD commentary, *This Is Spinal Tap* (Criterion, 1998), *c.* 49:31.

68 Christopher Guest, DVD commentary, *This Is Spinal Tap* (Criterion, 1998), c. 44:22. In the scenes which *do* feature live audio – David repeatedly flubbing his guitar part, the Nigel-less Tap performing 'Jazz Odyssey', Nigel's extended guitar solo and 'Lick My Love Pump' – the sound is noticeably rougher.

69 Non-existent or minimal manipulation of filmed events is a difficult task to accomplish, and proponents of *cinéma vérité* have, as a matter of course, hedged their bets. Stephen Mamber, for

instance, writes: 'Editing, of course, is a selective process and inevitably implies at least some shaping of the material. Use of the word *re-create* allows for a variety of responses in editing, and a *cinéma vérité* film does bear the selective influence of its creator. However, the respect in shooting for noninterference carries over as the determining force in the form of the final film. Even though reality is filtered through one sensibility, the filmmaker tries not to shape his material on the basis of limiting preconceptions' (Mamber 1974: 3).

70 Robert Leighton, DVD commentary, *This Is Spinal Tap* (Criterion, 1998), *c.* 13:24.

71 Ibid., *c.* 25:23.

72 Interestingly, by about the film's 33rd minute (at about the forty per cent mark), DiBergi ceases asking the band members about their history, and the film makes its last usage of *faux*-archival footage. From this point forward, the film focuses solely on the tour, and the relationship between Nigel, David and Jeanine.

73 An indispensable resource for the history and prehistory of Spinal Tap is Chip Rowe, *Spinal Tap A to Zed: A Guide to One of England's Loudest Bands* (self-published; available for download at <http://spinaltapfan.com/atozed/main.html> (accessed 18 August 2006).)

74 These and all other Spinal Tap lyrics written by Christopher Guest, Michael McKean, Rob Reiner and Harry Shearer, 1982.

75 Though the film itself elides the details of the band's 1965–67 history, *Spinal Tap* cultists know that the band went on a successful tour of the Benelux countries on the strength of the 'Gimme Some Money' single. In the 18 months that followed, the band changed its name over a dozen times, including periods as the Flamin' Daemons, the Doppel Gang, Love Bisquits and the Tufnel-St. Hubbins Group. (See Rowe's entry under 'Band Names'.)

76 Omitting several 'Aaa-aaahs', the full lyrics of '(Listen to the) Flower People' are:

Listen to what the flower people say
Listen – it's getting louder every day
Listen – it's like a bolt out of the blue
Listen – it could be calling now for you
Flower people, walk on by
Flower people, don't you cry, it's not too late
It's not too late

Listen – it's like a Mozart symphony
Listen – it's something just for you and me
Listen – to what the flower people say
Listen – it's getting truer every day

77 DVD extra features (Special Features > Vintage Tap Materials > Flower People Press Conference, *This Is Spinal Tap* (2000, MGM).

78 Michael McKean refers to these bands' semi-inspirational longevity in his DVD commentary. (Michael McKean, DVD commentary, *This Is Spinal Tap* (Criterion, 1998), *c.* 14:00.)

79 The album *This Is Spinal Tap* (Polygram (*not* Polymer) POL-817846) – which, like the fictitious album *Smell the Glove*, has a solid black cover, even though 'Hell Hole' is the only song which the albums have in common – contains the following songs: 'Hell Hole', 'Tonight I'm Gonna Rock You Tonight', 'Heavy Duty', 'Rock and Roll Creation', 'America', 'Cups and Cakes', 'Big Bottom', 'Sex Farm', 'Stonehenge', 'Gimme Some Money' and '(Listen to the) Flower People'. A 2000 CD reissue also contains two versions of 'Christmas with the Devil'.

80 The origins of this, perhaps the best-known lyrical turn in all of Tapdom, highlight the filmmakers' concern with authenticity. 'Staying true to the film's characters meant sometimes eliminating jokes that worked too well. "[For] 'Big Bottom', we had the lyrics 'my baby fits me like a flesh tuxedo', McKean recalls. 'We loved that line so we were looking for the answer line to that, and either Chris or Rob said, 'I want to catch her like Al Gianfriddo.' Al Gianfriddo made this famous catch of this hit by Joe DiMaggio in the early '50s. It made us all laugh, but there's no way these English guys would have had a line about Al Gianfriddo in their song, so you yank that one and put 'sink her with my pink torpedo'"' (in Bond 2003: 27).

81 Written by Marc Storace; from the album *Hardware* (Ariola, 1982).

82 'Love gun' is conceivably a nod to KISS, who released a 1977 song and album with that name.

83 Perhaps this is a bit harsh: mainstream entertainment has its place in the cult pantheon, as the *Star Wars*, *Star Trek* and *The Lord of the Rings* film cycles demonstrate most convincingly. But it is worth noting that *The Shawshank Redemption* barely made a return on its investment when it was released theatrically, turning a profit only when it arrived on video; and that Time Warner is the parent com-

pany of both the film's video distributor (Warner Home Video) *and* of *Entertainment Weekly*. (See the Internet Movie Database's page on the film's box-office returns, <http://imdb.com/title/tt0111161/business>, according to which the film cost approximately $25 million and made, in its theatrical release, about $28.3 million (accessed 31 August 2006).)

84 There are exceptions, but they are not unproblematic. Films such as *Snakes on a Plane* (see chapter two, note 6) and *Bubba Ho-Tep* (2002) seem to have been engineered, in part, for the express purpose of attaining cult status, a strategy which strikes many film fans as manipulative, thereby potentially *negating* the films' cult status.

85 See, respectively, the Internet Movie Database's pages for *Erin Brockovich* (<http://imdb.com/title/tt0195685/business>) and *Miss Congeniality* (<http://imdb.com/title/tt0212346/business>; both sites accessed 1 September 2006); the former film made over $125 million, and the latter over $106 million.

86 Guest's film *For Your Consideration* (2006) has many cast members and a certain sense of humour in common with the three films discussed above, but is decidedly *not* a mock documentary.

87 For a reasonably comprehensive list of mock documentaries, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mockumentary> (accessed 4 September 2006).

88 Christopher Guest, DVD commentary, *This Is Spinal Tap* (Criterion, 1998), *c.* 1:14:35.

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